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THE CULTURE OF SEXUALITY: IDENTIFICATION, CONCEPTUALIZATION,
AND ACCULTURATION PROCESSES WITHIN SEXUAL MINORITY
AND HETEROSEXUAL CULTURES

by

Joshua Glenn Parmenter

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTERS OF SCIENCE

in

Psychology

Approved:

Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.
Major Professor

Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Melissa Tehee, Ph.D., J.D.
Committee Member

Mark R. McLellan, Ph.D.
Vice President for Research and
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2018

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ABSTRACT

The Culture of Sexuality: Conceptualization, Identification, and Acculturation
Processes within Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Cultures

by

Joshua G. Parmenter, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2018

Major Professor: Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.
Department: Psychology

Social identity development theories emphasize self-categorization, in which individuals label themselves in order to form a social identity with a particular group. Strong social and cultural identities are tied to positive mental health outcomes. LGBTQ+ individuals that identify with the sexual minority cultural group are simultaneously navigating through the dominant heterosexual culture. Sexual minorities' negotiation of majority culture and minority cultures may be conceptualized in terms of Berry's model of acculturation. While research on acculturation has focused primarily on ethnic minority groups and their identity development, similar processes may apply for sexual minority populations as they interact with the heterosexual dominant culture. Additionally, while sexual identity has been extensively researched, very little has been studied on individual's definitions, conceptualization, and identification with LGBTQ+ and heterosexual cultures. The aim of the current study was to explore sexual minorities'

experiences of navigating different sociocultural contexts while negotiating their sexual identity. Fourteen sexual minorities (20-25 years) with a diverse array of intersecting identities (i.e., gender, racial, ethnic, religious, cultural) participated in semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups. Participants reflected on their sexual identity development, their experiences and conceptualizations of LGBTQ+ culture, as well as their experiences managing their sexual identities while navigating within different contexts. Findings from the current study supported three broad themes: sexual identity and intersections, LGBTQ+ and heterosexual culture, and contextual navigation (i.e., the on-going adaptive process of negotiating visibility of one's sexual identity within sociocultural contexts). Sexual minorities described stories of developing their sexual identity that were consistent with current models of sexual identity formation.

Participants described the LGBTQ+ culture as a culture of survival, acceptance, and inclusiveness. Most participants found a sense of pride and importance in identifying with the broader LGBTQ+ culture and believed it was beneficial in their identity development. Sexual minorities also shared the internal processes and behavioral strategies used to manage visibility of their sexual identities in order to avoid stigma and navigate different sociocultural contexts. Implications for research, practice, and education are discussed.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Culture of Sexuality: Conceptualization, Identification, and Acculturation
Processes within Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Cultures

Joshua G. Parmenter

This study aimed to provide insights into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) people within LGBTQ+ culture, and to explore how they disclose or conceal their sexual identities within different social environments. A qualitative study enabled me to become immersed within the stories of LGBTQ+ people, in order to better understand the construct and importance of LGBTQ+ culture. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, 14 members of the LGBTQ+ community from around the nation volunteered to share their experiences with LGBTQ+ culture and their negotiation of identity within heterosexual culture.

From participants' stories, key themes were identified: sexual identity and the processes of integrating multiple aspects of identity (i.e., ethnic, religious, gender), characteristics and values within the LGBTQ+ and heterosexual cultures, and how LGBTQ+ people make decisions to conceal or "come out" about their sexual identity depending on the environment. Participants described three levels of identification as LGBTQ+: individual, proximal social group, and a broader LGBTQ+ culture. The narratives converged to reveal a process, *contextual navigation*, for how LGBTQ+ people conceal or disclose ("come out") their sexual orientation depending on safety within a given environment. We suggest that people working with LGBTQ+ individuals should

encourage engagement in the LGBTQ+ culture, as this may provide support for identity development and facilitate mental health outcomes.

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It would be disrespectful to not acknowledge and thank my first academic mother who originally “brought me into this world of academia”—Dr. Katherine Crowell. While she is not at Utah State University (USU), she continues to be a mentor, LGBTQ+ role model, academic mother, and dear friend through my academic and personal journey. Her constant reminder to “never forget who you are or where you come from” continues to be a beacon of hope that has pushed me through the hardest of times. I recognize and am deeply honored by how privileged I have been with regard to such mentorship and academic family.

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your hard work and collaboration was greatly appreciated. I hope to work with you in the future as you continue your journey in becoming an agent of social change.

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Joshua Glenn Parmenter

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Traditional conceptualizations and definitions of culture convey a society or civilization with common values, beliefs, and customs (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). Tylor's (1871) conceptualization of culture is described as a, "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society" (p. 1). However, conceptualizations of culture have since been expanded upon, such as the American Psychological Association's (APA, 2003) definition of culture as, "the belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes (language, caretaking practices, media, educational systems) and organizations (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998, as cited in APA, 2003, p. 380). In short, culture is a set of shared beliefs, values, practices, and institutions that help govern social interactions among those who have common historical backgrounds (Adams & Markus, 2001). Definitions of culture have continued to expand, in part, because of its abstract nature and difficulty in limiting expressions of culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). Culture has primarily been discussed within the literature concerning racial and ethnic minorities, as well as immigrants and refugees, although arguments can be made that sexual minorities also have a culture to reference.

The Stonewall Riots in 1969 have been identified as the defining event that led to the birth of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) culture (Faderman, 2015). Indeed, the Stonewall Riots played a prominent role in the gay

liberation movement and continue to be an event in which sexual minorities celebrate Pride. In fact, the culture began to develop as early as the 1860s (Cass, 2005). The term “homosexuality” was first used in 1869 as an indicator of pathology and abnormality, while the term “heterosexuality” was associated with normalcy. Despite the context of pathologizing and marginalization, sexual minorities persisted and even thrived, finding safe spaces within affirming cities, such as bars, clubs, cafes, and other establishments.

Contemporary scholars and activists have rejected the pathologizing term “homosexual” in favor of more inclusive acronyms that capture the different and expanding terms. The present study uses the acronym “LGBTQ+” (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning or other personal identity label) to encapsulate a range of sexual identities (Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013). The acronym “LGBTQ+” demonstrates inclusivity as it promotes several sexual identities within the acronym and acknowledges other sexual minority identities through the “plus” symbol at the end. Although the acronym also excludes sexual identities (i.e., pansexual, asexual, demisexual), this acronym is not as cumbersome and moves away from older conceptualizations of non-heterosexual identities that are often implicitly centered around gay and bisexual men (Herek, 2010; Parent et al., 2013). The acronym also is inclusive of T (transgender) and is therefore consistent with the move toward inclusiveness in the community. Indeed, the focus of the present study is on sexual identity, however the broader LGBTQ+ community is increasingly addressing the concepts and intersections of gender and therefore we include gender minorities (i.e., transgender and gender non-conforming, gender queer) as part of the conversation regarding the LGBTQ+ culture.

The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s was a prominent era during which several marginalized groups, such as women, Blacks, and the LGBTQ+ community banded together to advocate for equal rights. After the Stonewall Riots in June of 1969, the LGBTQ+ community's social identity strengthened and the notion of "chosen families" emerged (Faderman, 2015). Sexual minorities began to celebrate the Stonewall Riots cultural event annually through what Western society now knows as "Pride." Gay liberationists placed emphasis on the "assertion and creation of a new sense of identity, one based on pride in being gay" (Altman, 1971, p. 109). Sexual minorities fought for visibility and acceptance within a heterodominant society, asserting feminist and queer theory perspectives of identity.

Queer theory emerged as a way to assist in understanding that the experiences and identities of sexual minorities resist categories of normalcy (Butler, 2006; Camicia, 2016; Duong, 2012; Sullivan, 2003). While categories are beneficial in some aspects, such as aiding in LGBTQ+ rights, they also have the potential to exclude (Camicia, 2016). In turn, queer theory aims to critically examine dominant paradigms of normalcy and raise awareness of how LGBTQ+ people are silenced within a heterodominant society. Prevailing constructions of normalcy are almost exclusively heteronormative providing validation and conferring power and privilege to those who fit heteronormative patterns (Butler, 2006; Camicia, 2016). Sexual minorities who conceal their sexual identity are, in a sense, feigning normalcy in order to avoid stigma while navigating within a heterodominant cultural context (Sullivan, 2003). Heterosexism includes the notion that tolerance can be obtained when differences are made invisible (Sullivan, 2003).

LGBTQ+ individuals' identities and experiences intersect with identities such as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, age, and ability (Camicia, 2016). Queer theory aims to be inclusive of all identities that may fall outside the socially constructed category of "normal." From this, queer theory promotes theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and how an individual manages and negotiates many overlapping identities that intersect and form a holistic sense of self (Cole, 2009; Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). However, intersectionality is not only about the multiple dimensions of identity (Syed & McLean, 2016), but more importantly is about how these intersecting identities interact and are influenced by power and inequality (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

Queer theory frames the current study by recognizing the existence of LGBTQ+ culture and uncovering inequalities that are directly related to sexual minorities being silenced and unrecognized (Butler, 2006). Queer world-making is a concept used within queer theory to emphasize how claiming LGBTQ+ identity and in-group membership is a way to impact the given sociocultural context (Duong, 2012). Through this, taking pride in non-heterosexual identities and the creation and identification of our own values, beliefs, ideals, community, and culture aids in the liberation of LGBTQ+ identity (Duong, 2012; Sullivan, 2003).

The aim of the current study is to provide exploration and insight of sexual minorities' experiences with the LGBTQ+ culture and their experiences with negotiating their identities within the heterodominant culture. Qualitative research allows the researcher to fully immerse themselves in the topic at hand in order to best understand the

perspectives and lived experiences of the participants being studied. Ultimately, qualitative research seeks to empower the voices of participants, especially those of marginalized groups. In order to best understand and empower the experiences of participants, the researcher is encouraged to be aware and explicitly share their own voice and biases (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2006).

The Researcher

I was born and raised on the West Coast my entire life. Although the West Coast is often associated with being liberal and open to minority groups, I was raised within a conservative and religious rural-suburban setting of the Portland metropolitan area. I was socialized within the heterodominant culture where heterosexuality was considered the norm and anything outside of heterosexuality was labeled as undesirable, deviant, and sinful. This context and my heteronormative upbringing engendered within me a feeling of conflict, shame, and the desire to hide my identity as a gay man by feigning normalcy until I came out to my family, friends, and girlfriend at 20 years of age.

Since openly identifying as a gay man, I became profoundly invested in the study of sexual identity development and the mental health of sexual minorities. My interests and subjective life experiences fueled my passion to give back to the LGBTQ+ community and pursue a career in psychology. During my journey, I lived in San Francisco for a brief time and became acutely aware of how my personal sexual identity, as well as my social identity with the LGBTQ+ community, was central to my sense of self. I felt that I was not only a sexual minority, but also a member of the broader

LGBTQ+ culture where we shared similar hardships and stories of marginalization and resilience we could trace back in history.

During my time in San Francisco, two major events occurred that made me feel more connected with the LGBTQ+ culture. The first was when the case of Obergefell v. Hodges ended, resulting in the Supreme Court granting marriage equality in June of 2015. That day, as well as the following week at the San Francisco Pride festival, the entire LGBTQ+ community celebrated the victory, waving flags on the streets and posting words of celebration on social media. I felt a part of a group. I felt I belonged, and I was beyond proud of my chosen family and the obstacles we have overcome.

A year later in June of 2016, the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting occurred and my community was heartbroken. While neither I nor my fellow LGBTQ+ peers and coworkers knew the victims of the shooting, we felt we had experienced a loss. On social media and the news, I continuously saw LGBTQ+ individuals express their pain of losing our brothers and sisters. The collective experience of sadness, as well as the experience of pride the year prior, were my own subjective proof that the LGBTQ+ culture unified us regardless of geographical location or differing identities and experiences. Additionally, these events helped foster awareness of how LGBTQ+ individuals possess a shared culture that they reference and celebrate.

However, when I moved to Utah in August of 2016, I lost my sense of community and culture as I found myself navigating within a conservative religious context that was not always affirming of my identity. I grew increasingly aware of how other sexual minorities in Utah went through a similar process of carefully calculating social situations

before deciding to conceal or disclose their sexual identity. These lived experiences fueled my interest in exploring the concept of LGBTQ+ culture and how sexual minorities manage the visibility of their sexual identity within different contexts.

I identify as a White, gender queer-masculine presenting (he/him/his), individual who grew up in a lower-middle class household and currently identify as agnostic. I became quickly aware of the privilege and oppression that intersected within my life while in Utah. I witnessed racial discrimination and structural inequality among ethnic minorities as well as the heterosexist and patriarchal views that impacted the well-being of women within and outside the religious contexts of Logan, UT. These observations, lived experiences, and my privileged status of being in a higher education setting informed my views and value system as a feminist and agent of social change. I am acutely aware of how my views, identity as an in-group member to the population of study, and other intersecting identities that are impacted by different systems of privilege and oppression influence my biases, feelings, and assumptions regarding the topic at hand.

The exploration of sexual identity and ideas of LGBTQ+ culture aid in raising awareness and recognition of the idiosyncrasies of sexual minority experience, which better informs research and practice. Recognizing the diverse experiences of sexual minorities' identity development and their sense of connection and identification with the LGBTQ+ culture is important in combating systems of oppression that seek to silence sexual minorities. The current study focuses on sexual minorities' experiences with the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ culture and their negotiation of identities when navigating

through the heterodominant culture.

The Study

Identity has been conceptualized as the personal characteristics, social group membership, and social relations that define an individual as a unique being (Carter, 2013; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Individuals maintain and negotiate many overlapping and intersecting aspects of identity that comprise their self-concept (Carbado et al., 2013).

Theoretical models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2005) describe the process of formulating and incorporating sexual identity into a congruent and unifying sense of self. Across sexual identity development models there are three central themes: (a) awareness of one's developing sexual orientation, (b) identity confusion or questioning of one's sexual identity, and (c) identity exploration and integration. Exploration and integration of one's sexual identity involves not only an internal process of identification, but also involvement in in-group social activities and engaging with the community or culture with which one identifies (Cass, 1979; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). Research, practice, and theory have aligned on the premise that one's identity formation is contingent on socially identifying with a community or culture (Phinney, 2000). However, unlike models of ethnic and cultural identity development (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Phinney, 2000), sexual minorities are not typically brought up in a culture or community where they may easily identify with other

in-group members (Rosario et al., 2006). Therefore, further research is needed to explore how sexual minorities understand and identify with the LGBTQ+ community and culture.

The social group or culture with which one is associated is an essential component to one's self-concept. Social identity development theories (Brown, 2000; Phinney, 2000) emphasize self-categorization in which individuals label themselves in order to form a social identity with a particular group. Socially identifying with a group, community, or culture has been a prominent feature in ethnic and cultural identity development models (Berry et al., 2006; Phinney, 2000; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001), but sexual identity scholars also believe the same can be applied to sexual minorities (S. Cox & Gallois, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Similar to that of ethnic minorities, sexual minorities also found a strong sense of identity and sense of self when connected to the LGBTQ+ community/culture (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). Sexual minorities have expressed that the LGBTQ+ community/culture is a supportive environment of individuals who are able to empathize and protect one another from oppression (Fraser, 2008; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). Meyer and Frost (2013) found that the negative effects of minority stress were significantly diminished for sexual minorities who felt strongly connected or engaged with the LGBTQ+ community. Involvement and connection with the LGBTQ+ community also promoted resiliency among sexual minorities (DiFulvio, 2011). Connection with the LGBTQ+ community decreased feelings of loneliness and thoughts of suicide (DiFulvio, 2011; Langhinrichson-Rohling, Lamis, & Malone, 2010), while a lack of connection with other sexual minorities was associated with increased internalized stigma (Puckett, Levitt,

Horne, & Hayes-Skelton, 2015). However, while research has focused on the LGBTQ+ community, there is an absence of literature that explores conceptualizations of LGBTQ+ and heterodominant cultures. Future research on LGBTQ+ and heterodominant cultures is warranted as it may provide insight on how these cultures effect sexual identity development.

While theorists have posited that identifying and engaging with the LGBTQ+ community or culture is healthy for sexual identity formation and may provide protection from minority stress (Feldman & Meyer, 2007; Meyer & Frost, 2013), previous research has uncovered mixed evidence (Adams, Braun, & McCreanor, 2014; Fraser, 2008). Qualitative research found that some sexual minorities avoided identification with LGBTQ+ culture (Barret & Pollack, 2005; Fraser, 2008). Individuals often avoided identification with LGBTQ+ culture to evade negative stereotypes such as risky behavior and promiscuity, often associated with the AIDS era, that were being perpetuated by members involved within the gay community (Fraser, 2008). Others have reported that the LGBTQ+ community is heavily focused on body image, sex appeal, shallowness, and can be exclusive if one does not fit the beauty standard embedded within gay culture (Fraser, 2008). Aside from characteristics associated with LGBTQ+ culture, some sexual minorities even feared they would be marginalized by fellow sexual minorities if they were too involved within the culture or perceived as “too gay” (Adams et al., 2014). Fear of marginalization from either the heterodominant or LGBTQ+ culture can lead to concealment of one’s sexual identity in order to conform to the dominant culture and avoid stigma (Pachankis, 2007). Research should further explore these concealment

processes and how one navigates between sexual cultures.

While LGBTQ+ individuals identify with the sexual minority cultural group, they are also simultaneously navigating through the dominant heterosexual culture. Sexual minorities' interactions between the majority culture and minority culture are reminiscent of Berry's (2005) model of acculturation. Although there is a lack of research that has focused solely on acculturation among sexually diverse populations, some qualitative research has indirectly addressed these processes (Adams et al., 2014; Fraser, 2008). Some sexual minority men reported that they felt more connected to the heterodominant culture than gay culture and even expressed that they could assimilate into the dominant culture to avoid stigma (Adams et al., 2014; Schneider 1997). Adams et al. (2014) found that sexual minority men preferred to appear "straight-acting" in order to blend in with the heterodominant culture. While research has explored identification with gay culture and the heterodominant culture, there is a considerable gap in the literature exploring how LGBTQ+ individuals may navigate between these cultures. Research should explore the strategies that sexual minorities use when navigating between cultures of sexuality and the methods that may be used to conceal one's sexual identity (Adams et al., 2014; Pachankis, 2007).

Research on acculturation (Berry, 2005; Phinney et al., 2001) has focused primarily on ethnic minority groups and their identity development, but similar processes may apply for sexual minority populations as they interact with the heterosexual dominant culture (Cox, Berghe, Dewaele, & Vincke, 2010). Sexual identity and the LGBTQ+ community have been extensively researched, but very little has been studied

about definitions, conceptualization, and identification with LGBTQ+ and heterosexual cultures. Finally, despite a great deal of literature on concealment of one's sexual identity, these studies have largely used quantitative methodology. Moreover, these studies did not explore the different methods sexual minorities may utilize to conceal their identity as a way to avoid stigma when navigating through heterodominant culture.

In an attempt to further the existing body of research among sexual minority populations, the current study used focus groups to (a) explore sexual minorities' definitions of LGBTQ+ culture and the heterodominant culture; (b) explain the norms, ideals, and behaviors within LGBTQ+ culture and the heterodominant culture; (c) understand how sexual minorities navigate between these cultures; and (d) explore the different methods sexual minorities may use to conceal or disclose their identity when navigating between cultures of sexuality.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature is divided into six sections: (a) a review of the history and current perspectives of identity development; (b) an overview of theories of sexual identity development; (c) an exploration of related identity development models such as social, ethnic, and cultural identity; (d) a review of the research on the conceptualization and identification with the LGBTQ+ community and culture; (e) an examination of acculturation research and the parallels between ethnic identity and sexual identity development models; and (f) the rationale and objectives for the current study.

Identity Development Models

The self, self-concept, and identity can be conceptualized as the personal characteristics, social group memberships, and/or social relations that define an individual as a unique being (Carter, 2013; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Oyserman et al., 2012). Theorists posit that these concepts are a product of situations that shape behavior within specific social contexts (Oyserman et al., 2012). Self and identity theories are based on the assumptions that people care about themselves, strive for a sense of self-knowledge, and can use this self-knowledge to make sense of the world (Oyserman et al., 2012). While some scholars argue that identity and self-concept are synonymous, identity can also be characterized as a way of making sense of distinct individual elements of one's broader self-concept (Carter, 2013; Stryker, 1980).

Erikson (1956, 1968) has generally been credited with first focusing on the

scientific meaning of identity. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial model of identity formation views identity in terms of the interaction between internal structural elements and social processes that are demanded by a particular society or significant social group (Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2007). Erikson described this process of identity development as beginning in childhood and proceeding through the lifespan; however, this was primarily an essential task in adolescence. Adolescence is often viewed as an exciting and confusing time as the individual is simultaneously experiencing developmental changes in other realms (e.g., biological, social, and cognitive), and ultimately seeking to answer the ever-present question "who am I?" (Carter, 2013; Erikson, 1968). Although Erikson's model is still frequently cited and used as the foundation for many identity theorists, it is not the sole theory of identity.

Marcia (1980) viewed identity as an "existential position, to an inner organization of needs, abilities, and self-perceptions as well as to a sociopolitical stance" (p. 109). Marcia's conceptualization of identity development and achievement claims there are two essential components to form an identity: crisis and commitment (Marcia, 1980). Identity crisis is best explained as a process by which one's values or elements of an identity undergo reevaluation, which then leads to a commitment to a specific value or role after reevaluation. Furthermore, Marcia integrated this identity formation and achievement model with Erikson's theory of identity to posit identity status categories: identity achievement, identity foreclosure, identity diffusion, and identity moratorium.

These identity statuses are categories into which one can be placed depending on how much one explores and commits to a sense of identity. The more in-tune and

developed this identity is within an individual, the more the person is aware of themselves as a unique being. The less developed this structure is, the more an individual experiences confusion within their own sense of self and relies on introjected values from dominant social groups (Marcia, 1980). Marcia emphasized that, while identity development is a distinctive feature in adolescent development, it does not begin nor end within adolescence. Identity development is not exclusive and is, therefore, a continual, flexible, and dynamic process of integrating new forms of self-knowledge into a self-structure or identity (Galliher, McLean, & Syed, 2018). Identity models demonstrate the degree to which one has explored and committed to an identity in a variety of life domains from vocation, religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity.

The identity models of Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1980) have been influential for modern identity development theorists (Burke, 1991; Carter, 2013). Identity research has evolved over time from the theoretical concepts of identity achievement, foreclosure, and moratorium into the analysis of identity's influence on behavior and how it is shaped by social context. For example, Burke's identity theory uses the concepts of reflected appraisals (i.e., perceptions of how others perceive one's identity or self; Mead, 1934) to address how individuals actively construct and present themselves within their social world. Burke's identity theory postulates that people strive for congruence and continuity within their internal and external view of themselves. Specifically, individuals strive for their internal self to be congruent with how others in their social environment perceive them to be (i.e., reflected appraisals; Carter, 2013). When threats are present that make an individual's sense of self inconsistent, dissonance arises and the individual will engage in

behaviors that align the reflected appraisals (i.e., external view of self) with their internal identity, thereby reducing dissonance (Burke, 1991).

Through identity theory, other scholars have further examined not only how identity defines and distinguishes one from another individual, but also how identities are activated or negotiated within social contexts (Carter, 2013; Galliher et al., 2018). These multidimensional frameworks for conceptualizing identity's content within specific contexts provide a holistic, in-depth analysis of identity (Galliher et al., 2018). Identity development and social context research describe how social relations, environment, and culture may influence and shape definitions of the self and scripts for interacting with others (Galliher et al., 2018; Tajfel, 1982).

The psychological study of identity has moved in the direction of understanding the self within its historical and cultural contexts, specifically by analyzing through the intersections of power and privilege (i.e., intersectionality; Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Galliher et al., 2018; Rosenthal, 2016; Rothenberg, 2016). Discrimination and oppression have a profound effect on identity development and are central tenets to conceptualizing identity within given cultural contexts (Carbado et al., 2013; Rosenthal, 2016). For example, those holding a dominant identity benefit from systems of power and privilege and are therefore seen as the norm, and those who are seen as outside of the "norm" are marginalized by the forces of oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Rothenberg, 2016).

As a result of oppression and discrimination, individuals with marginalized identities may negotiate their identities within a salience hierarchy (i.e., organization of

identities according to the likelihood of them being used or visible within a given context; M. J. Carter, 2013). Within this salience hierarchy, individuals process cultural messages and determine whether elements of identity are more socially desired or constrained within specific contexts, thereby increasing or decreasing an identity's position on the hierarchy (M. J. Carter, 2013). Such processes are specifically relevant for those with stigmatized identities, such as sexual minorities who have a concealable identity and can disclose or conceal this identity given their social context (Cass, 1979; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Pachankis, 2007).

Sexual Identity Development

Linear Stage Models

Clearly defining oneself with regard to gender and integrating an emerging sexual identity within a larger sense of personal identity are important and, at times, daunting tasks. Literature exploring sexual minority psychosocial health became a major focus during the 1970s and 1980s with a significant amount of this work dedicated toward the development of models that explained the process of sexual identity formation. These models of sexual identity development describe the complex, in-depth process of formulating and incorporating sexual identity into a congruent and unifying sense of self.

Linear models of sexual identity development focus on an individuals' initial self-awareness, the process of identity confusion, and finally the process of exploring and integrating sexual identity. Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), and Plummer (1975) all contributed early models of sexual identity development. Models ranged from four to six

stages beginning with identity confusion or a “pre-coming out” stage where individuals have emerging awareness of same-sex attraction. Following initial self-awareness and sense of being different, individuals enter a stage of identity confusion/identity comparison (Cass, 1979) where self-awareness of same-sex attractions increases (Coleman, 1982). In this stage, individuals begin to engage in behaviors to verify their sexual identity and manage feelings of dissonance, guilt, or even shame centered around their sexual identity.

As individuals become more self-accepting of their emerging non-heterosexual identities, they enter a third stage of identity tolerance/acceptance where they begin to navigate disclosure or concealment of identity as a sexual minority (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Plummer, 1975). Once the individual is comfortable and values his or her non-heterosexual identity, including involvement with the LGBTQ+ community, the final stages of sexual identity development become relevant. These final stages are exhibited by the individual engaging and gaining more experience in relationships with other sexual minorities, committing to a non-heterosexual identity (Plummer, 1975), and developing a sense of identity pride (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982). Most models end at this stage of identity pride (Coleman, 1982; Plummer, 1975), however, Cass proposed an additional final stage where sexual identity is integrated into an overall self-concept and is seen as only one aspect of a complex self rather than the sole identity.

Although Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), and Plummer (1975) recognized the intricacies of internal and external factors, their influence on identity development, and the many potential stigma management strategies, (i.e., behavior modification, restricted

or selective disclosure, and “passing” as heterosexual), these models follow an essentialist, linear, stage-like progression through the framework of developing a sexual identity. They also assume resolution of sexual identity development upon achieving the presumed final stages (Rust, 1993). Early models of sexual identity development can be expanded upon by acknowledging the life-long processes of identity negotiation and identity disclosure (Savin-Williams, 2001; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015), emphasizing the importance of social context (Rust, 1993), and highlighting the variations in sexual identity development influenced by gender (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000), ethnicity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004), and social class (Barrett & Pollack, 2005).

Differential Developmental Trajectories Model

Sexual identity theorists have departed from the essentialist linear stages and “intuitive appeal of conceiving of development as a simple, lockstep formulation” (p. 70, Savin-Williams, 2005) and have since focused on multidimensional frameworks that recognize the wide variability of individuals’ unique experiences (Rosario et al., 2004; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). These models recognize that while many individuals may have similar experiences or trajectories of developing a sexual identity, this formulation may not be a linear process but rather an ongoing fluid process that develops meaning in particular contexts (Diamond, 2006; Goltz, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2001; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Furthermore, the idiosyncrasies of an individual’s experience should not be ignored nor should they be placed in potentially confining stage models and should, instead, be analyzed as an individualized trajectory of development (Galliher et al., 2018; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Savin-Williams (2005) introduced the differential developmental trajectories framework for conceptualizing the diverse developmental experiences of sexual minorities. Savin-Williams' conceptual framework acknowledges: (a) that individuals may experience similar biological changes, social stressors and experiences, as well as ethical questions regardless of sexual identity (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1997); (b) sexual minorities are different in a variety of ways from heterosexuals (e.g., biological differences, relational stressors, social factors, coming out process) that should not be understated (Savin-Williams, 2005); (c) variability among sexual minorities in terms of life experiences, internal processes gender, ethnicity, and other contextual factors will be influential in experience; and (d) the importance of an individual's unique experience and how it is incomparable to another's (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Moreover, Savin-Williams' (2005) differential development trajectories framework takes into account both the similarities and differences of sexual minorities and heterosexuals, while acknowledging the various individual differences and contextual factors that may influence a sexual minority's developmental trajectory (Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Despite the fact that modern conceptual frameworks are highly comprehensive and open to contextual factors of sexual identity formation, a commonality across all models that tends to be overlooked is the relevance of activity and identification within a social group, community, or culture (Cass, 1979; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Lukes & Land, 1990; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Rosario et al., 2006). Scholars argue that identity development is contingent on social identification with a community or culture (Phinney, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2012). These models apply well

when posited to understand development within ethnic minority or cultural identity development models (Berry et al., 2006; Phinney, 2000). Developmental processes among sexual minorities may be similar to those of ethnic minorities within the dominant culture, although sexual minorities may lack an immediate connection with their culture while developing their identities within the heterosexual culture (Rosario et al., 2006). Ethnic minorities often have immediate access to their culture of origin and other in-group members through family connections, whereas sexual minorities usually do not have access to immediate family members with a shared sexual minority status. Sexual minorities often have difficulty locating social support from role models or other in-group members (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2010). Such research should be further explored to see how social or cultural factors impact sexual identity development.

Social, Ethnic, and Cultural Identity Parallels

Social Identity Theory

Similar to that of other socially marginalized groups, identity development for sexual minorities is not only a personal process, but also a process of group identification. While some social identity concepts are covered in models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979), the full process of social identity is not covered in a holistic manner. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides an integrative approach to the social factors and processes of how one formulates a social identity.

Social identity theory (Brown, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) focuses on the extent

that individuals identify with a social group, personal feelings about their group membership, and knowledge of the group's social status, in terms of power and privilege, compared to other groups. An assumption of this theory is that individuals develop their identities along a social dimension (i.e., group membership) and a personal dimension (i.e., the unique characteristics of an individual). However, social identity theory is more concerned with the identity that is formed from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In order for individuals to psychologically classify themselves as members of a social group, they must see that group as an essential component of their self-concept and place meaning to this membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, simply categorizing oneself to a social group does not complete one's sense of social identity with a group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) posited that socially categorizing oneself as a group member involves not only a sense of belongingness, but also a sense of shared or adopted qualities and values that are associated with a specific group. Social identity theory suggests that characteristics that are specific to a group can become the basis of social categorization. For example, if one detects a characteristic or value that is common in some people but not in others, one may use this characteristic or value as a defining feature when differentiating between an in-group and out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Social identity theory proposes that people aim to achieve and manage a positive social identity, which is partially derived from social comparison between in-group and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In terms of marginalized populations, group comparisons involve the in-group individuals self-categorizing as a member of the

minority group and, therefore, being knowledgeable of the particular characteristics, norms, and behaviors to which they subscribe. Minorities then engage in social comparison with the out-group (i.e., dominant social group) and evaluate that the out-group has a different set of characteristics, norms, and behaviors that the in-group deems undesirable compared to the in-group's set of values. A similar and more in-depth process of minority groups developing a sense of social identity and a sense of community is through models of ethnic identity development.

Ethnic and Cultural Identity Development

Ethnic identity is not a static concept, but rather a process where the individual constructs their own ethnicity through a process of comparison and social evaluation with a particular group, community, or culture (Phinney, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). Furthermore, this is a process of resilience to marginalization and establishing one's self as a member of a minority group within a multicultural society (Meyer, 2015; Phinney, 1990). Ethnic identity development is a multilayered process of identification that consists of an internal, as well as external, process of identifying and conceptualizing one's ethnic identity (Nagel, 1996).

Phinney (1989) examined similarities across a variety of racial and ethnic identity models and proposed a three-stage framework. Phinney's (1989) framework posits that individuals progress from an unexamined ethnic identity, where one is not cognizant of the importance of their ethnic identity, toward a fuller exploration and immersion of one's own culture, which eventually culminates into the achievement of an ethnic identity. In this final stage of identity achievement, an individual comes to understand

and appreciate the importance of their own ethnic identity and how it impacts their self-concept. However, achievement does not necessitate higher involvement in community or cultural activities (Phinney, 1990). Phinney postulated that ethnic identity achievement could be characterized by a strong personal identity and awareness of shared history or hardships, while having no need to remain connected to their community or cultural values. Conceptual frameworks have also postulated that ethnic identity may be an ongoing and cyclical exploration of the role of ethnic identity in one's life (Parham, 1989) and that contextual factors play a significant role in identity development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Phinney (1990) continued to note that ethnic identity has been conceptualized within the framework of social identity theory and utilizes many of its assumptions. Phinney emphasized four elements of ethnic identity development: self-identification with a group, a sense of belongingness with said group, attitudes towards one's group (positive or negative), as well as ethnic involvement which includes social participation and/or cultural practices (Phinney, 1990). Scholars have advanced off this developmental framework to focus more highly on identification with culture (Sue & Sue, 2012). Models of cultural identity examine how an individual originates from a state of conformity to the dominant culture and therefore disregards and views their own culture as inferior. This is followed by a state of dissonance where the individual integrates information that contradicts their cultural values and beliefs and begins to question, and eventually reject, their allegiance with the dominant culture. This results in an increase in introspection of one's own cultural identity and integrating these cultural values into

one's self-concept (Sue & Sue, 2012).

Socially identifying with a group, community, or culture has mainly been a prominent feature in ethnic and cultural identity development models (Berry et al., 2006; Phinney, 2000; Phinney et al., 2001; Sue & Sue, 2012). However, sexual identity scholars also embrace the same broad social identity theories (Cox & Gallois, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Denying sexual minorities the option of social identification with a marginalized community erroneously positions sexual identity as solely a matter of personal identity development (Cox & Gallois, 1996). While few scholars have mapped social identity (Cox & Gallois, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) and cultural identity theories (Lukes & Land, 1990) onto sexual identity development, research has demonstrated how the LGBTQ+ community has evolved as a social forum for sexual minorities and a way to aid identity development through connection with in-group members (Adams et al, 2014; Frost & Meyer, 2012; Meyer & Frost, 2013).

LGBTQ+ Community and Culture

LGBTQ+ Community

Sexual minorities, like ethnic minorities, create strong ties with in-group members and feel a sense of identity with the LGBTQ+ community (Frost & Meyer, 2012; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). The LGBTQ+ community has continuously shown tremendous resilience and connectedness throughout a history of oppression and marginalization (i.e., pathologization of same-sex attraction, discrimination, homophobia). Through historical events such as the Stonewall Riots and the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* that resulted in

the passing of marriage equality in 2015, the LGBTQ+ community has stood in solidarity with one another.

Research has found that the LGBTQ+ community is viewed as a supportive environment where individuals are able to demonstrate compassion and support for one another due to similar experiences with oppression (Fraser, 2008; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). For some sexual minorities, the LGBTQ+ community allowed them to connect with gay role models and brought about a sense of hope and belongingness (Goltz, 2014). Such community support and connection has demonstrated to be a protective factor for sexual minorities and is even posited to serve as a buffer against the effects of minority stress (Frost & Meyer, 2012; Meyer & Frost, 2013; Zimmerman, Darnell, Rhew, Lee, & Kaysen, 2015), decrease feelings of loneliness (DiFulvio, 2011), and decrease suicidal ideation (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2010). Additionally, identification and engagement with the LGBTQ+ community is beneficial for one's sexual identity formation (DiFulvio, 2011; Feldman & Meyer, 2007; Frost & Meyer, 2012; Meyer & Frost, 2013). Individuals who conformed to a "gay appearance" expressed stronger connection with the community and their own personal identity (Clarke & Smith, 2015). A lack of connectedness with other sexual minorities partially explained the relationship between internalized stigma and psychological distress (Puckett et al, 2015). Previous research has found that social connection and support from other sexual minorities may be highly important and influential in the health and psychological well-being of LGBTQ+ mental health and identity development (Szymanski & Carr, 2008).

Despite the literature on the positive aspects of the community, there seems to be a discrepancy due to the growing literature on potential negative effects of identifying with the LGBTQ+ community (Adams et al., 2014; Fraser, 2008). To begin, while the LGBTQ+ community is viewed as a multicultural community with diverse sexual identities, ethnicities, genders, and social backgrounds, the LGBTQ+ community is still centered around young, White, upper-middle-class, gay men (Barrett & Pollack, 2005; Goltz, 2014). Leaving individuals who do not fall under this narrow category feeling excluded and, at times, marginalized. For example, individuals who identify as transgender, gender queer, or gender non-conforming are either excluded or not a primary focus in research of the LGBTQ+ community (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Bisexual, pansexual, or sexually fluid individuals have also expressed a lack of connectedness or belonging with the LGBTQ+ community due to feelings of marginalization from both the LGBTQ+ community and the heterodominant culture (Bradford, 2004).

Some sexual minorities personally identify as LGBTQ+ but do not socially wish to identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Goltz (2014) found that older generations of sexual minorities felt more connection and identification, whereas millennials did not find the LGBTQ+ community to be an important element in their sexual identity. Specifically, sexual minority youth found the community to be “more constricting than liberating” (Goltz, 2014, p. 1519). Younger cohorts of sexual minorities may understand LGBTQ+ culture and sexual identity differently than older generations of sexual minorities (Goltz, 2014; Weststrate & McLean, 2010). Specifically exploring sexual minorities belonging to the millennial generation may be beneficial in conceptualizing

culture while remaining consistent with definitions that emphasize a generational component to culture. By looking into younger cohorts of LGBTQ+ people, research may be able to explore what the culture is currently and if these emerging adults acknowledge the history of the LGBTQ+ culture.

An emerging theme in the literature suggests that some sexual minorities actively avoid engaging or identifying with the LGBTQ+ community (Adam et al., 2014; Goltz, 2014). Sexual minorities expressed that by avoiding identification with the LGBTQ+ community they were also avoiding negative stereotypes that were being perpetuated by members involved within the gay community or in popular media within the dominant society (Fraser, 2008; O’Byrne et al., 2014). Sexual minorities have also reported that the LGBTQ+ community is heavily focused on body image, sex appeal, and conformity to a specific look or appearance; concern is expressed about the potential for exclusion and alienation for those who do not meet the undefined ideals of the community (Clarke & Smith, 2015; Duncan, 2010; Fraser, 2008; Huxley, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014; O’Byrne et al., 2014). Although the LGBTQ+ community has been extensively researched, there appears to be little research on LGBTQ+ *culture* and how individuals conceptualize and identify with this culture.

LGBTQ+ Culture

Culture provides meaningful messages about a particular group and produces a framework for which individuals can better evaluate and compare different social groups and establish a sense of “Who are we?” (Nagel, 1994, p. 163). Culture does not solely concern shared history, language, customs, and a shared group status, but also an entity

with which one can identify (Phinney, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2012). While some scholars argue that sexual minorities do not have a “traditional” culture in the same manner that ethnic groups do (Lukes & Land, 1990; Ross, Fernandez-Esquer, & Seibt, 1995), maintaining this viewpoint denies sexual minorities the ability to formulate and identify with a broader, more holistic perception of their own minority group. Sexual minorities have similar stories of hardship, strongly express the concept of “chosen families,” and possess a shared history that can be traced in Western society. Therefore, it is important to explore the lives of sexual minorities through a cultural lens. Limited research has attempted to define LGBTQ+ culture (Bradford, 2004; Fraser, 2008; Huxley et al., 2014), and these studies provide a starting point from which to launch additional work.

Previous studies focused on particular subcultures (e.g., lesbian culture, gay culture, bisexual culture) within the larger LGBTQ+ culture, specifically with a focus on gay male culture. Despite sociopolitical movements and activism increasing affirmation and, therefore, reducing discrimination of sexual minorities, there remains a divide within LGBTQ+ culture (O’Byrne et al., 2014; Taywaditep, 2002). Parsing out and studying individual subcultures potentially divides the larger LGBTQ+ culture and creates an atmosphere of separation rather than cohesion. While definitions of individual subcultures are important in recognizing differences and unique characteristics, it is important to obtain a holistic and inclusive definition of LGBTQ+ culture.

Additionally, most of this research was conducted during the 1990s and early 2000s. Sociopolitical movements have contributed to increased visibility and growing rates of acceptance and affirmation for LGBTQ+ individuals (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016).

Because of these movements in Western society, this area of research is in desperate need of a more updated exploration and conceptualization of LGBTQ+ culture. By conceptualizing culture, future research may be able to empirically examine cultural factors that affect LGBTQ+ individuals (Lukes & Land, 1990; Phinney, 2000). Finally, some of these studies have been examining LGBTQ+ culture through anecdotal evidence or stereotypes of gay culture (Ross et al., 1995) rather than gathering in-depth qualitative explanations from sexual and gender minorities on their conceptualization of LGBTQ+ culture. Therefore, it is important for future research to explore sexual minorities' explanations of LGBTQ+ culture to capture potential commonalities across different identities.

LGBTQ+ individuals identify with the sexual minority cultural group, while simultaneously navigating through the dominant heterosexual culture. Sexual minorities express fear of marginalization from both the heterodominant and LGBTQ+ culture, and often report concealment of sexual identity in order to conform to the dominant culture and avoid stigma (Pachankis, 2007). Sexual minorities' interaction between the majority culture and minority culture resonates with models of acculturation and bicultural adaptation (Berry, 1992, 2005). One could postulate that these models could map on to sexual minorities and their experiences with living in a multicultural society.

LGBTQ+ Acculturation

Tajfel (1978) discussed the issues associated with identifying and choosing between two aspects of identity that are experienced to be at conflict with one another,

and strategies for adaptively or maladaptively negotiating aspects of identity (Moss, 2012). Most ethnic minorities identify and adapt within two environments: the dominant culture and their own culture (Berry, 1992; 2005; Lukes & Land, 1990; Phinney, 2000). Acculturation has been characterized as the adaptation and cultural change due, in part, to contact with two different, and at times conflicting, cultural groups (Berry, 1992, 2005). Berry (1992, 2005) expanded upon the idea of acculturation and proposed that individuals and groups within a multicultural society are faced with two prominent issues: evaluating the importance of their own cultural identity, as well as achieving acceptance or success within the dominant culture.

Berry's (1992, 2005) model of acculturation takes these two issues and evaluates them on a dichotomous scale ("yes" or "no") and enables individuals to fall into one of four categories. Individuals could: (a) let go of their original culture and assimilate into the dominant culture (i.e., assimilation); (b) integrate into the dominant culture while remaining loyal to their original culture (i.e., integration); (c) maintain their original cultural identity and separate themselves from the dominant culture (i.e., separation); or (d) refuse or experience loss of cultural identification with both their original and the dominant culture (i.e., marginalization). Behaviors begin to shift and current identities are negotiated as an individual has the opportunity to integrate aspects of the dominant culture into their identity, or to devalue features of one's original culture (Berry, 1992; 2005; Lukes & Land, 1990; Phinney et al., 2000). While this literature mainly has been focused on ethnic minorities and immigrants (Berry et al., 2006; Phinney et al., 2001), there is a lack of literature that discusses acculturation and bicultural adaptation with

LGBTQ+ populations.

The process for LGBTQ+ individuals, although different from ethnic minorities, can be mapped onto Berry's acculturation model (1992; 2005). Sexual minorities, for the most part, are not raised within the LGBTQ+ culture and are instead raised within the heterodominant cultural context, therefore establish from a young age an assumption of heterosexual identity (Rust, 1996). As one begins to accept oneself as a sexual minority, one begins to be immersed into the LGBTQ+ culture and learns a new set of values and ideals. As sexual identity development progresses, sexual minorities continue to be marginalized by heterosexist institutions within the dominant culture and, therefore, begin to reject or de-emphasize the norms and values held by the heterodominant culture. This is a process similar to that of enculturation (i.e., emersion and learning of one's own culture; Berry, 1997); however, sexual minorities usually begin such a process later in life after discovering their sexual identity through exploration of history, media, and other external resources to gain knowledge of the LGBTQ+ culture. Through this process, sexual minorities hold cultural values that are pertinent to their LGBTQ+ culture while navigating within a heterodominant society. However, sexual minorities may begin to adapt their identities and deny identification with the LGBTQ+ community by way of concealing or "passing" as part of the heterodominant culture as a way to manage stigma (Goffman, 1963; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004).

Sexual minorities may choose to negotiate and conceal their sexual identity as a means of avoiding stigma while in the heterosexual culture and therefore "pass" as a heterosexual (Clarke & Smith, 2015; Moss, 2012). Some sexual minorities do this by

choice due to a lack of connection with the LGBTQ+ culture (Adams et al., 2014; Fraser, 2008) or in an effort to avoid stigma due to a non-heterosexual identity (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Pachankis, 2007). Scholars have suggested that sexual minorities manage stigma by way of withdrawing, non-disclosure (i.e., concealment of sexual identity), only disclosing to individuals whom they trust or disclosing within specific social contexts, and appearing as a member of the heterodominant group (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Pachankis, 2007). Sexual minorities have reported they felt more connected to the heterodominant culture and have even expressed the importance of assimilation into the dominant culture as a way to avoid stigma (Adams et al., 2014). Goltz (2014) found that sexual minority youth belonging to the millennial generation expressed satisfaction outside the LGBTQ+ culture. Research has found that there may be a preference within the LGBTQ+ culture to appear “straight-acting” as a way to blend into the heterodominant culture (Adams et al., 2014; Clarke & Smith, 2015; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Schrimshaw, Downing, & Cohn, 2016). In a qualitative study, thematic analysis found that the “good gay adopts an assimilationist position in relation to heteronormativity and conforms to the rules of compulsory heterosexuality” (Clarke & Smith, 2015, p. 22). While connection and belongingness with the LGBTQ+ community or culture are not indicative of having a non-heterosexual identity, research has found that connection with the community helps in identity development and facilitates networks of support (DiFulvio, 2011).

Overall, this body of literature provides a basic conceptual framework that describes LGBTQ+ sexual identity development, implications for viewing LGBTQ+

development within a cultural context and suggests LGBTQ+ individuals may undergo a similar process of acculturation and negotiating identity to that of ethnic minorities.

Despite the LGBTQ+ community has been extensively researched, there is a dearth of research focused on sexual minorities' definitions, conceptualizations, and identification with LGBTQ+ culture. Additionally, there is a considerable gap in the literature exploring how LGBTQ+ individuals may navigate between these cultures and negotiate their identities (Cox et al., 2008). Future research should explore the methods or strategies that sexual minorities use to conceal their identities when navigating between cultures of sexuality (Adams et al., 2014; Pachankis, 2007).

Finally, past research focusing on these topics has mainly utilized quantitative methodology. Qualitative approaches allow researchers to explain how individuals make sense of the world within a changing cultural context (Galliher et al., 2018; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Current Study

In an attempt to further the existing body of research among sexual minority populations, this study will conduct focus groups to (a) explore sexual minorities' definitions of LGBTQ+ culture and the heterodominant culture; (b) explain the norms, ideals, and behaviors within LGBTQ+ culture and the heterodominant culture; (c) understand how sexual minorities navigate between these cultures; and (d) explore the different methods sexual minorities may use to conceal their identity when navigating between cultures of sexuality.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Study Design

The present study utilized a phenomenological framework in order to understand sexual minorities' experience and conceptualizations of LGBTQ+ culture, as well as the experiences of negotiating sexual identity when navigating between LGBTQ+ culture and the heterodominant culture. Phenomenological research collects information and explores how a specific group of individuals experiences a phenomenon within their given context (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological frameworks provide rich data used to discover commonalities across individuals while respecting unique experiences (Creswell, 2013). Individual interviews and synchronous online focus groups were conducted using a videoconferencing platform (Zoom). Focus groups have been shown to facilitate more open discussion and are beneficial for identifying shared and incongruent beliefs on the topic being discussed (Adams et al., 2014; Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014).

Zoom is free and easily accessible web-downloaded videoconferencing platform that is compatible with both PC and Macintosh computer operating systems.

Videoconferencing provides opportunities to link people who are scattered across broad geographical regions, which aids researchers in overcoming issues of location and cost of travel while maximizing a diverse participant sample (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017).

Numerous studies have demonstrated how online interactions are comparable to that of face-to-face interviews (Campbell et al., 2001; Hoffman, Novak, & Stein, 2012).

Participants appreciate the convenience and greater anonymity that is perceived with online interviews and focus groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Zwaanswijk & van Dulmen, 2014).

Theoretical Orientation and Role of the Researcher

The study is situated within the theoretical framework of Queer Theory. Such a framework is used as a lens or tool to deconstruct present heteronormative ideals and critically analyze power and its association with and influence on identity and what is deemed “normal.” Queer theory also emphasizes an intersectional approach in analyzing and challenging social constructs while heavily taking into account privilege and oppression and its influences on an individual’s social world. Queer theory seeks to be inclusive of all identities that may be perceived as outside the “norm” by including them in the conversation of complex topics.

I, the primary researcher—a White, highly educated/first-generation student, able-bodied, agnostic, genderqueer-masculine presenting gay man—am cognizant of how privilege and oppression have intersected and impacted my life’s trajectory and how I continue to construct my worldview. Maintaining a reflexive nature, I regularly discussed how assumptions and views on LGBTQ+ culture and sexual minority experiences may have affected the present study (Adams et al., 2014). As I sexually identify as a gay man, I may maintain a sense of insider status with the participant group while also potentially being an outsider with respect to ethnicity, gender, age, religion, as well as other identities. Each individual possesses a story that deserves to be heard on their

conceptualization of the surrounding culture from their own unique lens. Acknowledging the insider status while also being aware of the unique differences among participants was highly valued through the research process in order to analyze how diverse experiences shape one's view of LGBTQ+ culture.

Participants

Participants were recruited nationally through LGBTQ+ organizations, LGBTQ+ listservs, and university diversity centers. The recruitment text (see Appendix A) specified that participants must be English speaking, self-identify as LGBTQ+, and be 18-25 years of age in order to be eligible for the study. Three participants were excluded because they did not meet age inclusion criteria and an additional two people were turned away after saturation had been achieved and recruitment closed.

Fourteen emerging adults between the ages of 20-25 ($M = 23.07$, $SD = 1.68$) whom identified as a sexual minority were recruited from across the U.S. Table 1 provides information regarding the participants' chosen pseudonyms, age, sexual orientations, gender identities, pronouns, ethnic identities, and the extent of study participation. Table 2 provides information regarding religious affiliation, education, relationship status, and community description.

Demographic Survey

Demographic Information

Information inquiring about participants' age, biological sex, gender identity,

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Pronouns	Ethnic identity	Study participation ^a
Alex	25	Lesbian	Gender Queer	They/them/theirs	White	I
Amadi	25	Bisexual	Cisgender Male	He/him/his	Black	I, M ^b , F
Jenny	23	Lesbian	Nonbinary Trans-Woman	She/her/hers	White	I, M
Kendra	25	Bisexual	Cisgender Female	She/her/hers	White	I
Lexi	25	Gay	Cisgender Female	She/her/hers	White	I, M, F
Moana	21	Bisexual	Cisgender Female	She/her/hers	Polynesian	I, M
Oscar	23	Gay	Cisgender Male	He/him/his	Latinx	I, F
Oliver I	22	Bisexual	Gender Queer	They/them/theirs	White	I, M
Oliver II	20	Queer	Agender	They/them/theirs	White	I
Pega	21	Queer	Cisgender Female	She/her/hers	White	I
Seattle	24	Gay	Cisgender Male	He/him/his	White	I, M, F
Squid	22	Bisexual	Cisgender Male	He/him/his	White	I, M, F
Summer	23	Bisexual	Cisgender Female	She/her/hers	Armenian	I, M
Walter	24	Gay	Cisgender Male	He/him/his	White	I, M

^a I = interview, M = Member checking, F = Focus Group, ^b = Amadi was the only participant who responded to member checking the focus group transcript. All other participants were unable to review focus group transcripts.

ethnicity, sexual orientation, education/occupation, geographic residence, and various aspects of their sexual identity and sexual orientation developmental history was assessed via a brief demographic survey (Appendix B).

Procedure

The present study obtained approval from the Utah State University Institutional

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Variable	Participant	Variable	Participant
Religious affiliation growing up		Current religious affiliation	
Protestant (Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian)	7	Protestant (Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian)	1
Catholic	4	Catholic	1
Jewish	1	Jewish	1
LDS	2	LDS	1
		Atheist	2
		Agnostic	2
		None	6
Relationship status		Highest level of education	
Single	5	Graduate school	5
Married heterosexual relationship	1	Bachelor degree	6
Committed to same-sex partner	4	Associate degree	1
Committed to other-sex partner	4	Some college	2
Income		Current state of residence	
\$15,000 or less	9	Arizona	2
\$15,000 - \$24,999	4	California	4
\$25,000 - \$34,999	1	Massachusetts	1
		Mississippi	1
		New York	1
		Ohio	1
		Utah	2
		Virginia	1
		Washington	1

Review Board (Protocol #8509). LGBTQ+ organizations and listservs targeted towards sexual minorities between the ages of 18-25 were used for recruitment. Email invitations directed participants to Youcanbook.me (an appointment management website) via a link to sign-up for an individual interview appointment. Researchers screened for LGBTQ+ identity and age through the scheduling web page and through the demographic

information survey. Individuals who did not meet the inclusion criteria for the study were contacted by email to cancel their interview enrollment, and their information was deleted. Participants who met the study inclusion criteria and wished to participate in the study booked an appointment and provided their name, email address, and a pseudonym they wished to use for the study.

Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. Before interviews and focus groups began, participants provided pseudonyms to maximize confidentiality when quoting material from transcripts. Within the demographic survey, participants were asked to submit their email addresses in order to receive a \$20 Amazon Gift certificate after completion of the interview and focus group. Transcription of audio recordings was ongoing throughout data collection in order to clarify emerging themes and refine interview questions. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim using a naturalism transcription technique (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). Naturalism transcription is believed to lessen any misrepresentation as the researcher moves closer to the data and natural ways of speech, allowing laughter, stuttering, and response/nonresponse signals (i.e., yeah, uh huh, um, mm) to provide clues and insight into the participants' affect and thought process (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006; Oliver et al., 2005). Completed transcriptions were sent to participants to review for accuracy and provide any additional information or reflection that the transcriptions prompted (i.e., member checking). Additionally, the primary researcher made conceptual notes regarding themes that emerged from each interview and focus group, engaged in personal analysis, and adjusted interview prompts.

Scheduled participants received a link by email that lead them to the consent form and a brief online demographic and sexual identity survey delivered through Qualtrics. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of the study procedures (Appendix C). Before the start of the interviews and focus groups, the primary researcher verified that participants completed the informed consent and, if not, participants were asked to reschedule. The primary researcher explained the consent form again in detail, providing participants with the opportunity to ask questions and/or voice concerns.

Triangulation

Qualitative methodology encourages the use of triangulation (i.e., multiple methods used to study interconnected phenomena from a variety of perspectives; N. Carter, Bryan-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Triangulation allows for verification of the information gathered from the qualitative methodology, thereby strengthening the credibility of the studies' findings (N. Carter et al., 2014). The current study achieved triangulation through individual interviews, focus groups, member checking, as well as through consulting the literature and the advising faculty member on emerging themes or concepts.

Individual Interviews

In-depth individual interviews provide participants with the opportunity to express opinions and beliefs that they may not feel comfortable in more public contexts (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). The researcher is given the

privilege of having participants provide and entrust information about their lives and experiences, which could be cathartic for some participants (Creswell, 2013). Individual interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. Interviews were semi-structured and utilized an interview guide to provide prompts that would guide discussion while allowing the researcher to ask additional follow-up questions (Appendix D).

The goal of this study was to highlight sexual minorities' experiences and conceptualizations of LGBTQ+ culture as well as the process of negotiating their identity within different sociocultural contexts. To this end, the author sought to ensure accuracy and authenticity, that is, that the data collected truly reflected the views and experiences of the participants. During the interviews the author validated experiences, reflected content, summarized and asked further clarifying questions in order to clarify material being covered within the interviews and focus groups. Individual interviews were video recorded and later transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the information provided. As soon as transcripts were completed and reviewed for errors by the primary researcher, they were emailed to participants.

Member Checking

Member checking is known as the review process of validation, expansion, and clarification that is undergone by the respondent or interviewee (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013), ultimately improving the accuracy and credibility of the study's findings. For the present study, member checking consisted of emailing participants a copy of their interview and focus group transcripts, requesting comments, clarifications, and corrections. Interview transcripts were attached to the first email request for member-

checking, and participants were contacted a second time one month after the initial request if they had not responded. If the participant did not respond after the second request, the participant was not contacted further. Nine of 14 individual interview transcripts were returned after member checking and one of five participants completed member checking for the focus group transcript.

Online Focus Group Interviews

Two online focus groups utilizing a semistructured interview guide were conducted to gather further information on themes emerging from the individual interviews. All participants from the individual interviews were contacted and invited to be a part of the focus groups and were asked to provide their availability through a doodle poll. Two participants did not show up for their scheduled focus groups, resulting in the first focus group containing three participants and the second focus group consisting of two participants. Online focus groups allow for rich discussion of topics on which participants may hold differing views (Zwaanswijk & van Dulmen, 2014). Focus groups improve the credibility and validity of the information gathered within the individual interviews while also furthering the existing qualitative data. Online focus groups were semi structured utilizing a script to help guide discussion (Appendix E). Online focus groups were video recorded and lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.

Assessment of Saturation

Interviews were conducted until the primary researcher obtained a point of saturation in the data, meaning that new information was not being gained by continuing

interviews with new participants (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Assessment of saturation was achieved through transcribing interviews and conceptual notes made during data collection, allowing the researcher to identify emerging themes. The primary researcher stopped data collection and consulted with the advising faculty to ensure no gaps in the data before moving onto data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Mack et al., 2005). Recruitment was discontinued, but two individuals were turned away after saturation was reached.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Methods utilized for analyzing and managing data are demonstrated in Table 4 (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2006). Qualitative data analysis began with conceptual and reflexive notes, analytic files, rudimentary coding schemes, and finalizing data using an iterative coding process. As online interviews and focus groups were completed, the research team (i.e., the primary researcher and an undergraduate research assistant) transcribed the video recordings verbatim. The primary researcher acted as the sole interviewer and, therefore, verified the accuracy of the transcripts by carefully reading through the content and using the video recording to edit any errors before beginning data analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify repeated patterns of meaning across groups. Thematic analysis utilizes an inductive reasoning approach that allows analysis to build on patterns that appear within the data to form larger thematic topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Braun et al., 2014). An iterative coding process was utilized by the research team, consisting of the primary researcher, undergraduate research assistant, and advising

Table 3

Data Management Methods

Tools	Function	Frequency
Conceptual memos and reflexive journal	Memos made during interviews on observations, emerging ideas, comments, the researcher's thought process, and information that may improve interview questions.	Ongoing
Preliminary coding system	Preliminary coding systems stems from the transcripts and is the beginning of the coding process. Categorization moves from broad, simple codes to highly complex codes as the researcher gathers more data. The process from memos, to transcribing interviews, to preliminary coding is an ongoing process.	After each interview
Reporting with chair	In person and phone meetings to aid the researcher in his development and process of the study. Continuous reflection on the research process and the data collected, collaboration on developing new questions, etc.	Weekly/bi-weekly
Thematic coding	Making connections across participants' interviews. Similar ideas or concepts are grouped together which formulates the beginnings of an organizational framework. Larger overarching themes are broken down into smaller subthemes. The research appropriately "fine-tunes" participant's narratives and quotations in order to best serve the aims of the study.	Ongoing
Codebook	Codebooks help facilitate and organize codes into a code scheme.	Once major themes are detected and subthemes begin to emerge

faculty member. The coding process involved the primary researcher and advising faculty member reading and analyzing all transcriptions. Initial themes were reviewed and analyzed further by the primary researcher and advising faculty member until presenting themes were refined. To minimize discrepancies in coding and themes, a final coding scheme was discussed between the primary researcher, undergraduate research assistant, and advising faculty member until consensus was reached.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Sexual minorities participants shared their experiences of their sexual identity development, experiences and ideas of the LGBTQ+ culture, as well as how they negotiated their sexual identity within different sociocultural contexts. Findings demonstrated three overarching categories that then consisted of several subthemes. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the themes and subthemes.

Sexual Identity and Intersectionality

Participants were first asked to share their experiences of sexual identity development and the various intersecting identities that comprised their sense of self. As participants discussed the narratives of their sexual identity development, three major categories emerged: sexual identity narratives, identity intersections, and centrality and salience of sexual identity.

Sexual Identity Narratives

Sexual identity processes. Participants spoke at length about the development of their sexual identity from childhood to the present day, describing sexual identity development concepts that are consistent with the literature (Cass, 1979; Savin-Williams, 2005) such as first awareness of sexual identity, self-labeling over time, coming out, and an increasingly positive self-acceptance across development.

Yeah, well um, I ‘discovered’ it fairly recently. It was last summer, so a little over a year now. But, um, you know I’m sure as most other people looking back

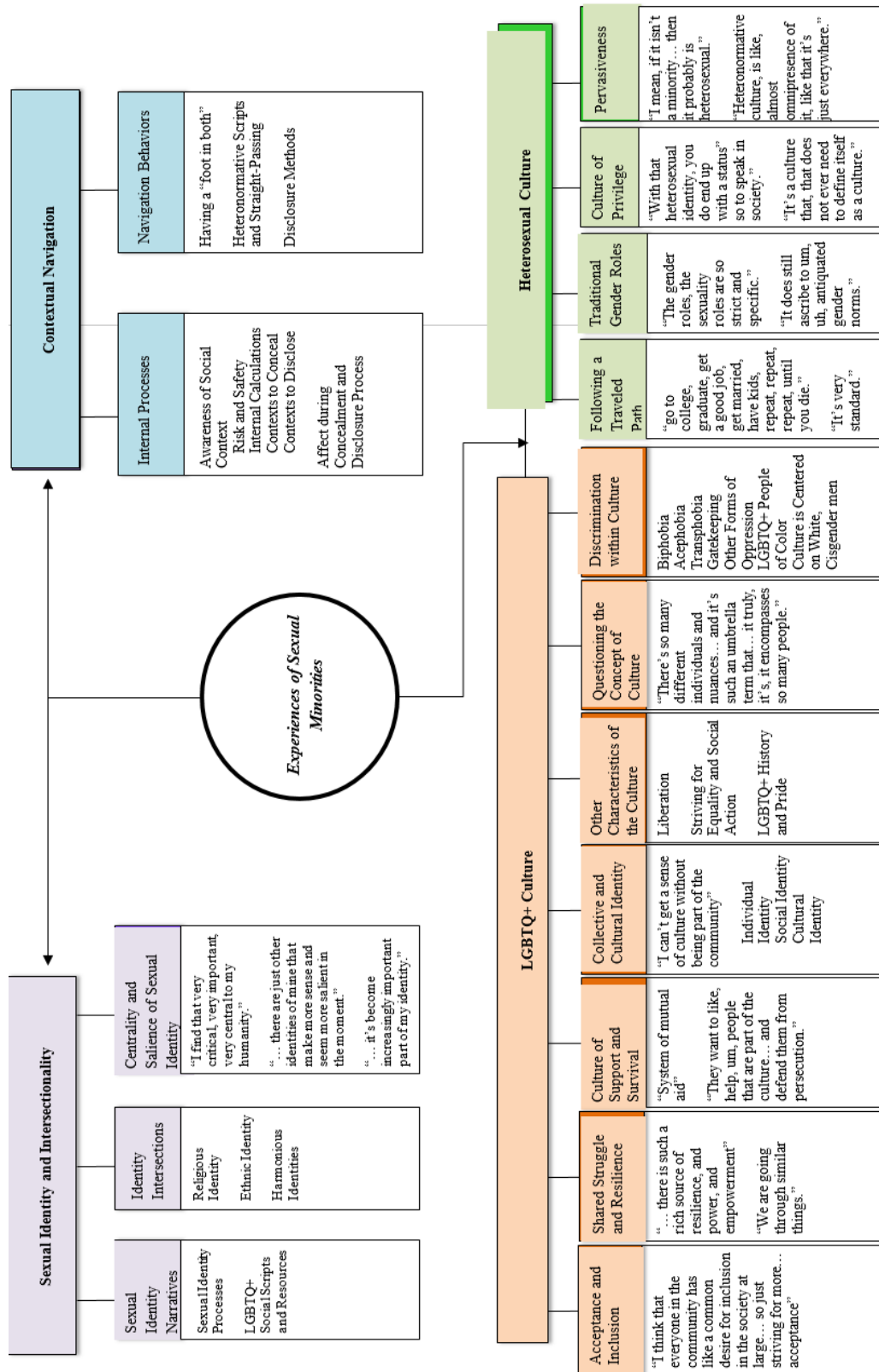


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes.

retrospectively there's like...there have been like "hints" so to speak all my life that like, now make a lot more sense. But it wasn't until last summer that I had this like, "Aha" moment... so I just exhibited like, attraction towards women since I was I think like 16 was when I kind of noticed it. Um, and I had had like sexual encounters with women since I was 16, but I kind of just played it off as like, "drunk fun" you know, everybody does it. (Summer, 23-year-old Armenian, bisexual cisgender woman)

Some participants described the exploratory process of self-labeling before committing to a sexual identity label.

It was kind of a progression. I uh, considered identifying as, uh, asexual or demisexual for a while, because I...I didn't feel any attraction towards women and I was trying to explain that with um, a lack-of-sexuality identifier. Um, and there still may or may not be a...a slight component of...of demisexuality to my sexual identity. Um, I have...it's...it's easier for me to develop sexual feelings for someone if I have a pre-existing relationship with them, but not exclusive to that, so. You know, maybe just a tinge of demisexuality, but um, I played around with that...that identity for a while and ultimately decided that, no I...I am attracted sexually to men and romantically. (Seattle)

It's just kinda an identity that I've developed as criteria emerged over time. Like, "oh... okay I guess it's this now"... Sexuality is so fluctuating it is so malleable, I don't feel like I should have to pin it down. (Oliver I)

Oliver I, a 22-year-old bisexual gender-queer individual (they, them, theirs), also reported that their commitment to a sexual identity label was mainly due to the history associated with that sexual identity.

I'd say, up to now, I identify as Bi, also because I... I had someone tell me a while ago that ummm... that the only real difference between pan and bi now-a-days is that... pan is newer and bi has a history, like in the community. Sooo, I felt like more comfortable identifying as Bi because there is a history of Bi people you can track back and the history is really important to me. (Oliver I)

Consistent with the Differential Trajectories model of sexual identity development (Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015), sexual minorities varied in their developmental milestones, with some who had not publicly come out to

their close family and friends. Moana, a 21-year-old Polynesian, bisexual cisgender woman, described how she was still “in the closet,” partially due to the conservative social context in which she lived, but also because of her initial awareness of sexual identity occurring at the age of 19.

So, I am actually a bit of a late bloomer, because everybody always...um, sorry. Cuz, everybody always—well at least a lot of the LGBT youth that I know, um, or individuals, not even youth, they always talk about how they had that moment in *second grade* when they saw another person and they were like, “Oh my god! I might be gay!” you know, and for me it was never that. Um, growing up I never ever had that moment where I was like, “Oh I like women.” It was definitely until—not until I left my parents’ house that I was like, “Yeah I don’t think I’m straight. [laughs] Like I definitely don’t think that’s something that I am!” And it was a really weird moment for me because I was just kinda like, “I don’t know who to talk to about this.” And at the time, I was friends with a lot of people who also were in that transition phase of like trying to figure out their sexual identity, um, and so we would always—I would always talk with all these people and eventually, I was just like, “I feel like the term for me right now that suits me best is bisexual.” So I mean, I’m sure that’s going to change, I mean, I...I...I *know* it’s going to change because as I have more conversations with people, as I—I’m a sociology major—and as we talk more about gender identity, sexual identity, I feel like I know I’m not straight, and I’m never going to be straight—like that is not something that I am ever going to be—and so, my...uh--well basically what I’m trying to say is my relationship with men right now [sighs] is very...I don’t care for men. I don’t. [Laughs] (Moana)

Participants’ narratives link to research documenting how factors related to ethnicity and gender interact and influence the differential trajectories in sexual identity developmental milestones (Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, & Armistead, 2002; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Findings should encourage research and practitioners to depart from a traditional lock-step framework that assumes a typical trajectory and focus attention on the individual differences in sexual identity development.

Participants’ early developmental stages of sexual identity formation typically

encompassed strong feelings of shame and internalized oppression (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982). Oscar, a 23-year-old gay Latinx cisgender male described how:

Growing up, it was a very constant struggle of always wanting to change it, trying to fix it, wanting to... um, deny that identity. Deny those attractions and deny those feelings. *(laughs)* So I remember, when I was a little kid and, ya know, always thinking like, 'oh, it's fine. Like I think it is just a phase.' Umm, eventually, like you'll grow out of it or, ya know, you'll change or eventually you'll, like, start liking girls and stuff like that. And... I think it was like a constant trying to like force ourselves to like, oh ya know... be okay with it. (Oscar)

Participants typically became increasingly affirming of their identity across time (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982). These progressions began with an initial phase of ambivalence, shame, or internalized homonegativity and eventually reconstructed into affirming and prideful attitudes towards one's sexual identity. Squid, a 22-year-old White, bisexual cisgender man affiliated with the LDS church reported:

I haven't been super accepting of myself or super unaccepting. Um, it's...I feel like there's enough tension there, there's enough tension between those parts, you know, those parts of me that don't want to accept and those parts that do want to accept that I generally sit in the middle. (Squid)

Squid later disclosed in the focus group a month later that positive feelings and acceptance towards his sexual identity had improved since his initial interview:

I feel like this interview was the catalyst for a lot of change in this area. I've really started to accept who I am over the last few weeks. It's taken a lot of practice. Coming out to myself in the mirror. Coming out in more public spaces. Being more confident with my religious and sexual identity. I've been teaching a lot of people about intersectionality, which helps me to accept my intersecting identities. (Squid)

While the majority of participants described the process of self-acceptance and cultivating a sense of pride in their sexual identity as slow and arduous, several participants described their sexual identity development as a smooth and affirming

process. Summer, a 23-year-old Armenian bisexual cisgender woman, stated, “I felt like everything made sense and that like I was very...very proud and enthusiastic about it. So the whole like, coming out process and accepting it myself came pretty quickly and easily.” Amadi, a 25-year-old African bisexual cisgender man, noted that his experience of coming out was, “liberating, um, I feel very alive, very friendly, very... like I can be who I... who I want to be.”

LGBTQ+ social scripts and resources. Participants indicated that developing their sexual identity within a heterodominant society was difficult as there were limited LGBTQ+ social scripts to reference. Oscar simply stated, “Well... there is no.... no role or script you have to follow to be gay.” While some participants expressed this as a liberating process and how LGBTQ+ individuals were not confined to notions of traditional gender roles or heterosexual ways of being (to be discussed in Cultures of Sexuality section), this posed an obstacle in developing their sexual identity.

Idaho as a state is deeply, deeply conservative as well, on social issues, uh, specifically. Um, and so I think this is part of the reason why it was so difficult for me to be able to find the vocabulary and identity to be able to describe my experiences for so long. (Jenny, 23-year-old White lesbian trans-woman)

I grew up most in the U.S., but when I was 12, I moved to Mexico. So a lot of that [sexual identity] development also happened in Mexico where my parents are from. So it's very... small, Catholic, very conservative um town. And so, a, a lot of that development kinda happened there. A lot of those attractions occurred there. And so that made it a lot more difficult to like... find a resource for... like an LGBT community. Because like there really wasn't much there. (Oscar)

For both Jenny and Oscar, as well as the majority of participants, there were very few resources and limited access to LGBTQ+ community due to the highly conservative and religious contexts. The isolation from LGBTQ+ resources left some sexual minorities

feeling lost due to lack of knowledge and support to facilitate sexual identity development. Jenny added to this idea, stating, “I didn’t really have the grammar or the vocabulary to describe my identity, uh, for a very long time.”

The narratives of these sexual minorities describe an active pursuit of information about LGBTQ+ life and sexual identity. Unfortunately, due to heterodominant and non-affirming cultural contexts, sexual minority youth often do not have role models to help seek knowledge regarding LGBTQ+ experiences, making this an independent process. Walter, a 24-year-old White gay cisgender man, shared how for sexual minorities, “you’re not really sure what the hell is going on in the world. You’re just trying to use the resources that you have to make sense of it.” With this being said, some materials and resources regarding LGBTQ+ experiences can be filtered through heterodominant culture’s perceptions and stereotypes of sexual minorities. Amadi shared his views regarding some forms of media and the dissonance he experienced from seeing these representations.

Generally, when people want to refer to gay people in movies they’re always like, um, gardeners, or interior decorators, or wedding planners, or just outlandish funny people. Right? They’re never like, the academics or doctors or basketballers or politicians. (Amadi)

Amadi’s frustrations with the popular media’s stereotyped portrayal of LGBTQ+ people and the lack of inclusivity of nonstereotypical representations of sexual minorities was a common source of irritation among LGBTQ+ individuals in this study. Some felt forced to continuously search for information on LGBTQ+ community and life in a “desert of nothing” (Leap, 1993). Jenny described how she joined her high school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) club and how it was, “integral in me being able to imagine a,

like, a life after high school, um, as a queer person because I... before joining the GSA I just didn't have a model for what LGBTQ adulthood could even look like."

Half of the participants expressed how an LGBTQ+ role model would have been beneficial in their sexual identity development and self-acceptance. Lexi, a 25-year-old White lesbian-identified cisgender woman, said that it, "...would have been nice to have someone to talk to. Um, and not feeling so closeted." Oscar shared his experience.

I don't think I have any, like, gay models... I think if I had had a model, like a model or someone to like talk to that was older... that would have been sooooo amazing. That would have been so, so helpful. And I think it would have, it would have helped with a lot of the distress and emotional difficulty. (Oscar)

Although the majority of participants did not share any experiences with LGBTQ+ role models, both Squid and Seattle described their unique experiences of having a LGBTQ+ role model and stated that it was highly influential in their sexual identity development.

I guess right now... I've kind of found somebody who is a role model and mentor for me... it's interesting talking to him and talking to him about that identity and what that means for him... and it gives me a lot to think about. And I think it's, it's particularly valuable at this point in my life. But I feel like I am only just starting on that journey of being fully accept myself, like yes... I've acknowledged like "Yes I am bisexual!".... But I'm only starting to get to the heart of what that really means and I think that this guy has helped out a lot. (Squid)

I did have what I would call a role model. Um, I had a close friend who um, she has a very diverse experience, um, a little bit gender non-binary, she identifies as pan and a little bit on the ace spectrum, and she um, kind of walked me through each of those experiences over, I don't know, the course of our friendship. Um, I think she was the person I engaged with the most to discuss what I was experiencing and um, you know she...she provided me a few resources and just kind of helped me work through what I was experiencing too. (Seattle, 24-year-old White gay cisgender man)

Despite the lack of LGBTQ+ social scripts and role models, sexual minorities utilized other resources to acquire information regarding sexual identity. Oliver II, a 20-year-old

White queer-identified agender individual (they, them, theirs), spoke about their experiences online and taking a class on gender and sexuality and how reading articles on gender and sexual identity allowed them to find the language in order to label and develop their sexual and gender identity.

I kind of got the word “agender” from online communities, because I had... I would have never known that that was like something that existed. But um, I... after taking this class, I kind of started to think, “Well that kind of... that kind of works for me!.... So agender is a word that works for me, because it’s non-specific and it’s about like, how I don’t fit in with this particular system. (Oliver II)

The majority of the participants shared their experiences of searching through books, television shows, and internet forums in order to gain helpful information regarding their sexual identity.

...there was just like three or four pages in that book that bordered on um, sexual identity. And that was all I... that was the only thing I saw. And I was like, “Okay. Um, I’m not weird.” For them to have... for them to have written about it meant that I’m not the only one. (Amadi)

I do remember like, using or like some resource from the LGBTQ community that helped me so... I actually ummm, watched “*Queer as Folk*,” the, the UK version. Which was, like foundational in a lot of my self-acceptance....Ummmm and then “*Will & Grace*” was also extremely amazing, like another source. (Oscar)

Hmm. Um, I probably used media and uh, discussing with others who were out. And uh, reading, you know, short stories or uh, even comics or uh, watching TV shows that had um, gay couples together or discussing with friends who are out about their experiences and trying to resolve that against what I was feeling and, uh, experiencing as well. (Seattle)

I think movies, TV shows, and the internet-- reading people’s stories and reading blogs and stuff like that was really helpful. And seeing what other people have been through and knowing I’m not alone. Um, and these are other people’s experiences that seem to be true for me as well.... That was really helpful, because I didn’t really talk to anyone personally while I was trying to figure out my identity. It was all just me looking at other resources. (Lexi)

Oscar particularly pointed out that these television shows and LGBTQ+ narratives on social media were helpful combating self-stigmatization. Oscar stated, “it was honestly through that, that kinda helped me like, ya know, fight against the demonization and that stigma that I had placed into the culture.” Oscar’s story, among many of the participants, demonstrates how media can influence positive identity development. The rise in technology and social media within the 21st century has provided different modes of communication and social support for sexual minority youth and emerging adults (Varjas, Meyers, Kipeman, & Howard, 2013). Previous research supports the stories of participants suggesting that social media and internet forums are used to facilitate learning in LGBTQ+ issues and history, and provide safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and emerging adults (Craig, McInroy, McCready, DiCesare, & Pettaway, 2015). Craig and colleagues (2015) found that media could engender positive coping skills and resiliency for LGBTQ+ individuals. Media exposure to LGBTQ+ celebrities and icons were beneficial in affirming sexual identity among sexual minorities (Forenza, 2017).

While most participants talked about their exposure to LGBTQ+ narratives in the media, Moana expressed how growing up in an LDS household, she had to create her own life path and her own conceptions of sexual and gender identity.

[*shrugs*] I mean, I like to think that I have my own...my conception of gender and sexuality is something I came on my own, and not necessarily something that was influenced from my childhood. (Moana)

Lack of resources, active searching for LGBTQ+ role models and communities, as well as obtaining knowledge from internet sources on the LGBTQ+ experience are all illustrations of how sexual minorities lack immediate connection with their culture while

developing their identity within a heterodominant culture (Rosario et al., 2006).

Considering sexual minorities are not raised within a household, community, or culture that grants them access to other in-group members, sexual minorities often have to seek out knowledge and learn about their culture on their own. The proactive process of acquiring information about one's identity from outside sources is characteristic of *horizontal identities* (Solomon, 2012). Horizontal identities are traits or identities that are not acquired from family, but are instead identities that one possesses but can only learn through self-exploration and from other in-group members. Individuals with a horizontal identity learn information about their identity through observing and participating in cultures that share a similar identity. Pega, a White queer-identified cisgender woman, described how she connects her identity with the LGBTQ+ community with that of a horizontal identity.

So to me it means that I am a part of a larger social history. I'm a part of a horizontal identity, not a vertical identity. Right? That there are people of my same age group that are a part of this world, you know, and beyond, but it's not something hereditary. (Pega)

Identity Intersections

Research has built off of linear stage models and additive models of identity development into a multidimensional approach of analyzing the many intersecting aspects of identity, and the systems of inequality and injustice that impact a given individual (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). All participants discussed at length the different intersecting identities they possessed and how these identities shaped their current sense of self. Although some of these identities were compatible and harmonious,

others described a difficult and, for some, an on-going process of negotiating/integrating these identities.

Religious identity. Identities can conflict when core values and beliefs of one identity are not compatible with another. Many participants described how some identities produced some form of conflict or restriction from further sexual identity exploration or affirmation. Seattle expressed how developing an affirming sexual identity was prolonged because of the religious family context.

I grew up in a religious background, um, not harshly religious but my mom is Protestant and after my parents separated my dad became Mormon. And those are both communities that were not particularly welcoming to, uh, those in the LGBT community. And I think I never particularly considered um, whether or not I could be anything other than heterosexual for quite some time because of that. (Seattle)

Seattle's feelings of being restricted in identity exploration were highly similar to Oscar's experiences living within a Mexican Catholic context. Oscar shared, "I didn't allow myself because in my family, we are very religious, very very, like ya know, rigid, um conservative." Sexual minorities who fear facing ridicule and ostracism from their religious institutions and spiritual community could experience cognitive dissonance from incompatible identities (i.e., "tension an individual experiences between two psychologically inconsistent thoughts or beliefs"; Moss, 2012, p. 7). Squid expressed his difficulties developing his identity as a bisexual man while maintaining affiliation with the LDS church. He shared, "I feel like my religious identity is a huge conflicting thing ummmm... and I feel like in a lot of ways it's really the only source of conflict."

Religious and sexual identity conflicts are of particular relevance as one study found that approximately 66% of nonheterosexuals experienced some form of conflict

between their sexual and religious identities (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Sexual minorities seek to reduce feelings of dissonance between their religious and sexual identities through hiding, denying, avoiding, altering, or completely rejecting the less salient aspect of identity (Crowell, Galliher, Dehlin, & Bradshaw, 2015; Moss, 2012). Efforts to relieve feelings of dissonance have even gone to the lengths of passing, lying (Appleby, 2001), or “praying away the gay,” often leading to feelings of depression and defeat (Dahl & Galliher, 2012a, 2012b). Sexual minorities often are left with finding ways to live contently with these two conflicting identities always in flux, as Squid expresses below.

Uhhh, there’s not really anything I can do to resolve the discomfort, I just have to kind of have to learn to acknowledge it exists and there’s not really anything I can do about it, even if I were to leave my faith tradition... that doesn’t change the fact that it’s always going to be part of who I am and it’s going to follow me wherever I go. (Squid)

Similar to Squid’s experience, some sexual minorities live with both identities but choose to separate them (Pitt, 2009), allowing these sexual minorities to pass while in religious contexts while simultaneously maintaining their sexual identity. For others, such as Oscar and Amadi, religious identity became neatly integrated with their sexual identity. Oscar described the process of negotiating his sexual identity within the confines of the Catholic context in which he was raised:

I think when I was like 12 or 13... around that age range was when I thought, like I told myself, like “I am gay. It’s bad. It’s sinful... but ummm, ya know... I guess in the lottery of thing, everyone has to be something. Maybe it’s just like the *(makes quotes with fingers)* “the cross I’ll bare” ... because I was raised very Catholic, so, that was one of the phrases that like, I kinda told myself, ya know like this is what like... I have to deal with this, like the struggle or the temptation that I have to deal with... Eventually I think I just kinda made a decision of like “ya know what... I believe in this God that’s going to ya know, who was more merciful and who, um, intended for me to be this way. And he loves me for who I, I, like who I am. And so I am going to accept that.” (Oscar)

Oscar's ability to find self-acceptance of his sexual identity through his religious identity allowed for the beginnings of an identity synthesis process (Pitt, 2009). Pitt observed that some gay men chose to integrate religious and sexual identities through identity synthesis, integrating their sexual and religious identities "into an altogether different identity" (p. 49), ultimately providing relief for the individual. Amadi described this relief of not being pinned down by religious values or beliefs, "sometimes I am not able to step out of that bubble, or that, you know space of religion... now I am happy that I am way much more enlightened. I'm not confined to just a religious dogma or doctrine."

Interestingly, as for all of our participants who identified as LGBTQ+ people of color, religion was often conflated with ethnic identity and their sense of ethnic collective identity. Summer described the intricacies of navigating her sexual, ethnic, and religious identities, "Armenian's are very Christian people, so um, of course there is exceptions, um, but you know overall the general belief is that, like, you know, gay is bad."

Ethnic identity. Experiences of LGBTQ+ people of color cannot be understood without in-depth exploration of the multiple and intersecting stigmatized identities and systems of oppression they face (Wallace & Santacruz, 2017). All four ethnic minority participants described their intersecting identities, specifically their ethnic and sexual minority statuses.

That's, a definite intersection of my identities when I say like, ya know, I'm gay... but I'm also like Mexican, so... and it definitely, ya know, interacted with each other. (Oscar)

I feel more strongly to two other things: that I am a woman, and that I'm Armenian. So like those three minorities combined make up like the central part

of who I am, so you could say it's like a third of it. (Summer)

While some described their sexual identities and ethnic identities as intersecting and equally important, Moana described it as a less central component of her identity.

I wouldn't say it's not something that *isn't* central to who I am, but I wouldn't say it's like the *absolute*, like, the *first thing*—like if I were to give, um...if someone were to say identify yourself without saying your name, the first thing that I would absolutely say is, "I'm a Pacific Islander." I would not say, "I'm bisexual!" Like, "I'm a bisexual woman." Um, that would definitely be a little further down the line. Um, so I would say, yes, it is central to who I am, but also *no* because it's not something I...I feel like is the core part of myself, if that makes sense. (Moana)

For people like Moana, sexual identity may not be central as a result of conflicts in compatibility of identities. Participants who identified as an LGBTQ+ person of color expressed that their sexual and ethnic identities did not fit well with one another given their ethnic cultures values and beliefs.

Mine doesn't fit with my racial identity, and my ethnic identity because of course they've always been, I mean, gay people have always existed since the world began, especially in Africa. (Amadi)

Um, not to say that they don't fit...LGBT culture. Well, being Polynesian, um, in a lot of ways I don't fit. (Moana)

So for me like being, ummm, Mexican and ummm gay has been like one of those big things for sure. Kinda like, sorta clashing. So today, I do identify as agnostic, but once upon a time I identified as strongly Catholic and very, very active in my Catholic community and so... that was a, a sort of uh violent internal clash ummm there. (Oscar)

Participants concerns with their ethnic and sexual identities not integrating highlights conflicts of allegiances (Morales, 1989). "Conflicts of allegiances" is a component of a larger identity development model for LGBTQ+ people of color (Morales, 1989), where sexual minority people of color address conflict between their

ethnic and sexual identities.

Simultaneous awareness of being the member of an ethnic group as well as being gay or lesbian presents anxiety around the need for these lifestyles to remain separate. Anxiety about betraying either the ethnic minority or the gay/lesbian communities, when preference is given to one over the other, becomes a major concern (Morales, 1989, p. 231).

Conflicts of allegiances highlight the unique experiences that participants like Moana face when coming out, as family support is valued and being rejected from one's family or ethnic group is harmful for psychological adjustment (Sarno, Mohr, Jackson, & Fassinger, 2015).

I like women. There's always a very big pushback for Polynesian women who *do* like women. I know a ton of Polynesian lesbians who have been A: cut off from their family, kicked out of their house, I mean...I'm sure everybody does. But in...uh, from a cultural perspective, it's really sad to see that because I know that A: the reason why they're kicked out from their family is because Polynesian families are very heterosexual dominant. And um, B: being cut off from your family is like having your heart ripped out of your chest, because Polynesian communities are very much about...fam... being very family centric. Um, uh so uh...where am I going with this? I don't know, Moana! And C: I have heard this echoed throughout my whole life from cousins and friends alike: How can you like another girl um, when girls are um, you know, too dramatic. Like, how can one like another girl, like that's just so weird. (Moana)

Experiencing stigma or being rejected by her family and ethnic community would compromise her social support and ethnic identity. Many ethnic communities view being LGBTQ+ as violating cultural, and at times, religious customs or values (Bridges, Selvidge, & Matthews, 2003). LGBTQ+ people of color reported that their ethnic and sexual identities mainly came into conflict when they were in contexts of other in-group ethnic minorities.

When I'm [at the Armenian Youth Federation], my Armenian identity is definitely more of the focus. Um, it's more of the dominant um, thing that we like, that I'm...I'm expressing. You know, I'll speak my language more, I'll be

focused on those kinds of issues more. Um, and I wouldn't be as vocal about my sexuality unless it was a situation that really um, required it. So, it wouldn't necessarily be something that I'd volunteer as easily as I would in any other social context. (Summer)

When I'm with my family, in a very Mexican culture or environment or we're doing Christmas together or we will do all these sort of customs... I can't be gay because that's not allowed there. A lot of people don't know, and it's not something ya wanna bring up. (Oscar)

While LGBTQ+ people of color “can have positive racial/ethnic and LGB identities and form strong affiliations to both communities” (Meyer, 2010, p. 443), ethnic and sexual identities were described as two separate identities rather than conflicting identities (Moradi et al., 2010). Ethnic minority participants described that these identities were intersecting and created their conception of self; however, these identities were seen as two different “worlds” that at times did not seem compatible with one another.

Conflicts between ethnic and sexual identity can partially be attributed to the systemic oppression that ethnic minorities face within the LGBTQ+ culture and sexual prejudice or and homophobia within ethnic communities (Balsam, Molina, Beadness, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Morales, 1989; Sarno et al., 2015). White LGBTQ+ participants denied any conflicts in identity hierarchy and negotiation of their sexual and White identity. Squid and Lexi share their experiences as cisgender White people.

The White male is kind of the poster child for the LGBT community. That's kinda who we see as being, ya know, the face of the community and then ya know... White women come next. And then just kinda breaking it down from there all of these different ummm... ethnic identities and ummm... religious identities kind of like fall into the pecking order... and... so, in a lot of ways... I feel like... because I'm a White male... I have it really good, in comparison to a lot of people. Ummm, and there's not a lot of conflict. Ummm... and I feel like that became particularly... I became particularly aware of that after I was... speaking with an African American lesbian. Uhhhh, I was just talking to her, just about her experience and she was saying like, “part of the problem is that for me... like

within the African American community, homosexuality is seen as being a White thing.”... Ummm, and that was, that really opened my eyes because I was like man... I don’t have to deal with that. I don’t have to deal with my race fundamentally disagreeing with who I am simply because I’m White. Like..... it’s... ya know, they have plenty of other moral issues with it or whatever, but there’s not really conflict between race and sexual identity for me. (Squid)

Yeah, I think I said in my interview, um, I don’t think this really applies to me because I don’t feel like any parts of my identity are in conflict. Um, being a White person, not really religious, I’m from the Northeast, from New York. It’s really liberal, so I’ve never had that problem or felt like my identity didn’t belong with the people around me, if that makes sense. (Lexi)

The oppression and stigma LGBTQ+ people of color face due to their ethnic/racial identity and sexual identity is a priority for mental health practitioners (American Psychological Association, 2012). The APA (2012) issued guidelines for research and practice with LGBTQ+ individuals that advise psychologists to “consider as critical factors in treatment the ways in which clients may be affected by how their cultures of origin view and stigmatize homosexuality and bisexuality... as well as the effects of racism within the mainstream lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities” (p. 20). Research and practice that seeks to benefit those who do not enjoy race, class, and heterosexual privileges is warranted (APA, 2017).

Harmonious identities. Despite the conflicts between sexual, ethnic, and religious identities, participants emphasized the many positive aspects of their sexual identity. Four of the participants emphasized how their sexual identity shaped or influenced how they interact with others, their world, and its influences on their interests and values. Jenny shared, “my sexuality, it really shapes how I interact with so much of the world.” Squid echoed this by saying, “being a gender or sexual minority informs *everything*. Um, it informs every action, every interaction.” Alex, a 25-year-old White

gender queer lesbian (they/them/theirs), and Oscar shared how being a sexual minority was highly important to them and was seen as more than just attraction or sexuality.

Um, I...well I think it's a really—it's become an increasingly important part of my identity in like...you know as I look back on my life I can see how not being in touch with that was sort of influential in my development. Um, and so now that I'm in a position where I can kind of own it and have it be more central, that really drives, like, a lot of my kind of like interests and values I guess. (Alex)

Ya know, my sexual identity was more than just that. My sexual identity was like other parts of me. The things that I did. The things that I do. The things that I enjoy in general. But also... I like men and I like dating men. (Oscar)

Sexual minorities felt that this identity gave them a sense of purpose and unique perspective that influenced how they viewed the world and society at large. Participants also described how their sexual identity harmoniously intersected with other aspects of their identity, such as their educational, political, or professional identities.

I think that's one of my aspirations, and so my goals with, my, my own work and my own ummm, advocacy and activism and stuff is... to be able to continue fighting for the LGBTQ community to still symbolize that sort of freedom, and that sort of space where anyone can be welcome. (Oscar)

So it's like all three of them like...uh, ignite this like fire in me to fight for each of their rights, you know, like Middle Eastern minority rights in the states, women's rights all around the world, and LGBTQ rights all around the world. (Summer)

Jenny and Walter further this notion when expressing how their sexual identity served as an internal motivator and facilitator for growth.

I also think of it also as a motivator... and this may sound really confusing because I just went on this whole thing about how my sexual identity is not a big part of who I am... but I do think that it is, in itself, a motivator for others, um... including myself. Right? Because ya get a lot of people who don't necessarily like you or accept you because of who you are. But the best thing to do for that is to use your identity as a motivating factor to show that it doesn't really matter what other people say. You can still persevere. (Walter)

Yeah so for me, my sexual identity is really framed around, um, creating space

and relationship and growth, um, in a non-patriarchal setting, so one that, a sexuality that does not center men. (Jenny)

Identifying as a sexual minority seems to be, for this group of participants, connected to a passion for education, advocacy, and social justice. Having an LGBTQ+ identity appears to influence educational, political, and advocacy identities to help bring about social change and reform (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008). Riggle et al. found that LGBTQ+ individuals stated their sexual identity was a central feature to their sense of self and that engaging in social advocacy and serving as a role model for others was highly important to their sexual identities.

Centrality and Salience of Sexual Identity

Furthering the discussion of the positive aspects of their sexual identity, participants also spoke of the importance and centrality of their sexual identities. Similar to research on the positive aspects of sexual identity (Riggle et al., 2008; Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010), participants believed that this was central and important to who they were and influential in their development.

I find that very critically, very important, very central to [my] humanity. (Amadi)

Very much so! Um, especially because of how it informs what I do in my day to day life.... I would say very much it, um, it's a central part of who I am, because it's a central part of what defines my actions and my feelings. (Squid)

I feel like it is a very salient point for me to acknowledge that I am bisexual. (Kendra)

Um, I... well I think it's a really—it's become an increasingly important part of my identity in like... you know as I look back on my life I can see how not being in touch with that was sort of influential in my development. (Alex)

Oliver II (they/them/theirs) shared that their sexual identity was an important part of who they were, especially when in situations where they feel “othered.”

When I’m with people who aren’t my close friends, so it becomes like this othering thing that is like at the forefront of my mind when I’m in those kind of situations. So yeah, it’s a big part of who I am. (Oliver II)

While the above participants stated that their sexual identity was central and important to who they were, Lexi acknowledged that being a sexual minority was not the only aspect of her sense of self. Lexi shared an intersectional approach to identity while simultaneously highlighting the importance of her sexual identity.

like... I don’t see myself as “I’m just gay” obviously I have intersecting identities. And that’s not like the only thing about me (*laughs*). Ummm, sooo yeah, it’s not like my central defining feature, but I think it is really important to who I am. (Lexi)

Despite participants emphasizing their sexual minority status as a salient and central aspect of their self-concept, many participants, sometimes regretfully, disagreed. Several participants actually described their sexual identity as not central or important when conceptualizing who they were or how they presented to others.

I think my sexual identity kind of sets me apart from others, but like being a minority... like having a minority sexual identity kinda sets me apart... but I don’t really think it’s that... hmmm (*laughs*) okay I am trying to say this without sounding like rude... but I don’t think it’s necessarily that important. Like it, it’s not an important aspect of my identity. Like I am not motivated by my sexual identity, uh my job is not a part of my sexual identity, my research is not necessarily from my sexual identity. (Walter)

I don’t think it’s so important to my identity that everyone knows that I’m gay... My (*sighs*)... my knee jerk reaction is yes and no. Um, you know I, if I had to describe myself in so many words, I’m not sure that gay would be the first or second or sixth word I would use. Um, but that said, I do see myself as um, someone who is gay and I’m you know, comfortable assuming that I’ll be part of the LGBTQ, uh, law bar in the state where I practice. (Seattle)

There are more aspects of myself that I consider to be like... things that are a part of me and things that are more outward about me than just being like... being gay. (Oliver I).

Oscar, Jenny, and Moana shared the complex process of negotiating identity saliency depending on the circumstance. These individuals described how different aspects of their identity become more central or important given contexts, social surroundings, and other minority statuses (i.e., ethnic minority status).

I think it depends on the day (*laughs*)... I think some days I, I think me being gay is more, ya know, okay. It's just who I am, this is my identity. I think a lot of times being Mexican might be like okay, this is what I am feeling more right now. Ummm, I think it depends on the day. It depends on the context. It depends on who is around me. Ya know? If they're, if I am in a room um of most of my undergrad, I... amongst my friends I was the only Mexican. And so that really, in those contexts I often felt like my Mexican identity was mo—, seemed to like, ya know be more important. (Oscar)

Also other times, uh, there's just more... there are just other identities of mine that make more sense and seem more salient in the moment. (Jenny)

For me, it's just been kind of-- it's just a part of me. It's just something that I think about sometimes. Sometimes I don't. Um, I would definitely say that I think about my racial- the racial aspect of it more than I do my gender. But that's because obviously I am brown [*Gestures to self*] Obviously. (Moana)

Moana, as well as other participants, highlighted the process of negotiating identities within a saliency hierarchy (Stryker, 1980) and how competing identities that are more important within particular contexts become higher within this saliency hierarchy (Carter, 2013; Galliher et al., 2018). Salience of identity seems to be of particular importance to LGBTQ+ people of color as they navigate life with two social groups and marginalized identities. Marginalized identities, such as ethnic and sexual minorities, encounter the forces of power and oppression as systems within the White patriarchal heterodominant society privilege those who are White, cisgender, able-bodied,

heterosexual people (Rothenberg, 2016). From a microlevel point of view, individual experiences of discrimination, homophobia, and heterosexist remarks are encountered daily for sexual minorities. Participants shared how their sexual identities became more central when they were challenged or threatened by discrimination or oppression.

I'm a psychology major, and one of the classes we're taking is psychology of gender... which is mostly just an opportunity to... for this instructor to get on her soap box about how she believes gender roles should be and to take the opportunity to shit all over the LGBTQ community. Ummmm, and there was one point where there was... it just got to be a little too much. Ummm, she was making derisive comments about um, particularly gay males. Ummm, and there were members of the class that were piggy-backing off of it, there were offensive slurs being thrown around, and finally I just had to raise my hand and say, "Soooo, this is something that is very important to me. I am a bisexual male. This is, this is real. What, ya know, what I experience is real and you guys are not treating it with respect, and this is not okay." And it was interesting. It was very, it was uncomfortable, ummmm to say the least. Ummmm to come out in such a vulnerable place, but... that said, it ended up being a really good learning opportunity for a lot of people. The tone in the class changed a lot, and it turned into, "okay, like... what can we do better? If you feel like this is an unsafe environment, what can we do better?"... And I said, "Okay, well here are the words you need to stop using. Here are the fundamental understandings you need to have in order to be able to create a safe environment." Ummmm... and I feel like a lot of minds were changed ummmm, about kinda the struggles that we have to go through in this community. (Squid)

While I was younger, I am from Bakersfield, California. And um... so it's a conservative uhhhh, not really urban city, but like it's just very closed off. Close minded. So, when I was living there, and um just existing there and not going out of town to my drumline stuff... it was more central to who I was, because again it was like... I was being challenged constantly, day to day. Like... being gay is not a good thing there, necessarily. And so... I adopted it to be more outward because I felt like... I had to in a way... interesting. (Oliver I)

I'm kind of trying to telegraph out there that this is a part of my identity that I like to acknowledge and I think also part of it being your central identity-- central part of your identity-- is you're trying to kind of broadcast out that you don't want to hear homophobia type of stuff... And when I present myself as being bisexual, as part of my core identity, I'm also letting them know that I'm not open to those kinds of conversations. (Kendra)

The majority of those who shared their process of sexual identity becoming more salient when addressing oppression stated that they made a proactive decision to speak up for the LGBTQ+ community and to be an agent of social change. However, Amadi expressed that, at times, this is not always as seamless as others described. For example, while Lexi expressed that her sexual identity became more salient for her when addressing oppression and discrimination, Amadi noted that this was a more calculated process of making his identity visible or not in order to address discrimination.

Lexi: Like if I hear something... someone saying something about the LGBT community, I might then feel internally like I need to represent the community.... Um, yeah in those instances it would jump to the front and be like, I need to say something.

Amadi: Yeah... that's a... it's actually very interesting to hear that. Um, because for me, I would have to make some calculations in my head before to determine if it would jump to the front or if I would just let it slide.

Sexual minorities in this study described a process similar to that observed by Carter (2013), where identities become activated depending on context and stimuli (i.e., social interactions). From this perspective, an identity is moved up within the saliency hierarchy when activated by social stimuli, at which point the identity drives and motivates an individual to act congruently with that identity. In these situations, some participants' sexual identities became activated when encountering discrimination or oppression within their environments and they made the internal decision to defend the identities by addressing those who enacted discrimination.

LGBTQ+ and Heterosexual Culture

A major undertaking of the current study was to come away with a more holistic and in-depth conceptualization of the cultures of sexuality: LGBTQ+ culture and the heterosexual culture. Participants were asked to define and conceptualize LGBTQ+ culture and heterosexual culture and describe their experiences in these two cultures. Participants shared a wide variety of characteristics, norms, ideals, positive and negative implications of each culture.

LGBTQ+ Culture

Exploration and articulation of culture is essential in order to propose that LGBTQ+ individuals, in fact, have a culture and are considered a cultural group. Participants expressed passion and a deep sense of interest when describing the LGBTQ+ culture and the positive influences it had on their sexual identity development. Participants emphasized that the LGBTQ+ culture had several qualities that comprised the culture.

Acceptance and inclusion. A large majority of the participants stated one of the central tenets of the culture was an overarching ideal of acceptance that governed the culture. Squid shared this sentiment, suggesting that LGBTQ+ culture is “built on this idea of acceptance.” Several participants echoed the notion of acceptance as an important characteristic that defined the culture.

I think that everyone in the community has like a common desire for inclusion in the society at large... ummmm... yeah, so just like striving for more ummm acceptance. (Lexi)

I still do hold that like, part of LGBTQ culture is just the general ummm... vision and values of being who you are... and being accepted as you are and being able to express who you are... and being accepted as such. I think that's one of like the values of LGBTQ culture. I don't think it's always... completely well practiced. But I think that's like something that I see as part of that community. (Oscar)

we've had to learn to be flexible and accepting in order to form the types of coalitions that we've needed to in order to get our rights. (Alex)

Summer shared her experience identifying with the culture, "I just feel like it's a place where you feel like you belong." Jenny described their experiences of belonging to the LGBTQ+ culture. They described how the culture provided a safe space to be authentic with their sexual identity and facilitated social connections with other LGBTQ+ people.

I think that this culture has given me a means of making my life...habitable. Um, before I really immersed myself in queer culture, ... I felt massive senses of uh...disconnect from, and disassociation from myself, from people around me... Essentially because I was, uh, living a life that was not livable for me. And so...and so, entering queer culture for me was really like, being able to breathe for the first time. (Jenny)

Jenny's experiences of belonging to the LGBTQ+ culture provided them with a space to identify as a sexual minority without fear of judgment or dissonance. The LGBTQ+ culture allowed sexual minorities to be congruent with their sense of self and facilitated living a meaningful life. Past research has shown that sexual minorities have a strong sense of identity when connected to the LGBTQ+ community (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009).

Participants described the LGBTQ+ culture as highly inclusive and welcoming. Amadi shared, "the culture promotes a lot of inclusivity, identity, and intersectionality." Due to this quality of inclusion, sexual minorities described the culture as highly diverse.

The community is gonna be something that is more supporting. Something that values diversity. Something that ummm... is helpful to anyone. Even people who

may not be a part of the LGBTQ community... I think it's important for the community to be supportive of everyone and not necessarily just themselves. (Walter)

The L-G-B-T-Q-I... W-X-Y-Z, um it's willing to expand in the coming years as many, as, for as much people as possible.... when I think of inclusivity I think about there is a space for everyone. I think within the LGBTQ culture, people allow other people who are not within the culture to be in the culture. (Amadi)

I feel like that community in gener...general is so welcoming, all-accepting, non-judgmental, you know? Like, they're a place where everyone—gay or straight or whatever—can just feel happy and welcomed and like nobody's going to tease them or bully them for being different in any way, whether it's like green hair or you know, ethnicity, body image, all of that, like I just feel like they're such an all-inclusive community, where it doesn't matter what your sexual orientation is, you...they're...they're like arms wide open, “We will take you in.” (Summer)

The LGBTQ+ culture values inclusion due to its historical experiences of alienation and persecution that forced sexual minorities to band together in order to survive. Inclusion of sexual and gender minorities with different intersecting identities has led the culture to become highly diverse across its members (Woodiel & Cowdery, 2013). Jenny expressed how the LGBTQ+ culture is not only inclusive of sexual and gender minorities but has also been inclusive of other minority groups and promoting social movements for other minority groups. Jenny described the new updates to the Philadelphia Pride flag.

the new uh, pride flag that came out of Philadelphia this year, which added black and brown stripes, uh, to the rainbow flag, um, is a great example of that, because it shows how, uh, there is a movement within the larger LGBTQ community to pivot towards, uh, being more racially accepting. And challenging systems of white supremacy, which I think is absolutely built on maintaining...making sure that, um, queer people of color, and trans people of color can continue to live at the most basic level. (Jenny)

While the LGBTQ+ culture was described as already being centered around values of acceptance, inclusion, and diversity, sexual minorities described that there is

still room for growth. Alex agreed and stated, “I think there’s room for flexibility in our culture.” These hopes for the LGBTQ+ culture centered on striving to develop the culture and stop experiences of discrimination from within the culture. Others shared similar ideas of improving the culture.

I’d really like to see, um, an increased space for you know, discussions and acceptance of intersectionality across all...all axes. Across race and ethnicity, across gender and gender identification, across uh, asexuality to sexuality and...and aromanticism to romanticism. I think um...I think we’ll be stronger and more connected if we are able to come together and be willing to listen to and...and try to understand everyone’s experiences. (Seattle)

I... just wish that everyone would be more accepting and understanding of LGBT experiences. Um, to the point where no one made any assumptions and it wasn’t necessary to come out all the time. That would be an ideal world. (Lexi)

The concept of acceptance within the LGBTQ+ culture is at an individual level, which fosters a broader goal of inclusion within the LGBTQ+ culture. In turn, inclusion cultivates feelings of being accepted and the ability to be authentic about one’s sexual identity. Findings are congruent with past research that described the LGBTQ+ culture as a safe space and highly inclusive of different ages, races, ethnicities, gender identities, and sexual orientations (Goltz, 2014). Previous research found that sexual minorities believed the LGBTQ+ community was highly diverse and promoted a culture of diversity and inclusion (Sexton, Flores, & Bauermesiter, 2018).

Shared struggle and resilience. In addition to the ideals of acceptance within the LGBTQ+ culture, participants placed emphasis on members of this culture having a “shared struggle” that was integral within the LGBTQ+ culture.

realizing that there are other people out there with my same identity, and um sharing experiences with them and um, sharing hardships related to that identity with them or sharing positive things related to that identity or otherwise with

them. Um, I think it's played a... a role in me becoming more comfortable with being out in the public sphere. (Seattle)

it kinda helps to validate your experience when you are going through something, even if you are not personally to the other LGBT people... you're not the only person who has been through this. Ummm there is other people out there ummm... it's just empowering to know that. (Lexi)

Sexual minorities' experiences of shared struggle may facilitate connectedness with the LGBTQ+ culture as a community-level resource to cope with marginalization (Meyer, 2003). Experiences of connecting with the LGBTQ+ culture appeared to influence positive sexual identity development, including the coming out process, validation, and affirmation of sexual identity (Frost & Meyer, 2012). Asakura (2016) similarly found that "coming into one's own" allowed sexual minority youth and emerging adults to turn their experiences of pain and hardship into seeking resources and connecting with other sexual minorities as a way to affirm their identity (p. 9). Oliver I specifically commented on how being "othered" within a heterodominant society allows culture to be created from shared experiences of oppression.

[We're] sharing some sort of struggle. Like I feel like everybody who is queer, has had to struggle in some way to either accept who they were or to be who they were... it's something that's been othered for so long that like... you create a culture around it because these are people with shared experiences and... like experiences that are like... yeah... there's a culture, a community, a shared sense of "we are going through similar things." (Oliver I)

The phenomenon highlighted by Oliver I demonstrates that sexual minorities' perseverance may be fostered by the sense of shared hardships and collective identity (Asakura, 2016). Moreover, while westernized views of healing are seen as a process undertaken by the individual, participants provided a collectivist approach. Despite similar experiences of internal conflict and systems of oppression that disadvantage

sexual minorities and promote marginalization, the LGBTQ+ culture and its cultural members described themselves as resilient.

they're a group of people that have, um, that receive a lot of hate and bias and all of that, I feel like that's why they have such a stronger, deeper, uh, concept of empathy (Summer)

I do wanna like emphasize and clarify and state that I think that there is suuuch a rich source of resilience, and power, and empowerment that comes from the LGBTQ... That's what I see it as: a representation... And that still continues to help a lot of people today. (Oscar)

Oscar's statement suggests that the formulation of LGBTQ+ culture may contribute to the resilience of its members (Zimmerman et al., 2015). While definitions of resilience vary (Masten & Reed, 2002; Rutter, 2007), psychological research has primarily focused on the "capacity to recover from psychological trauma or to adapt successfully to adversity" (p. 221). Not only did sexual minorities describe the LGBTQ+ culture and its cultural members as highly resilient and empowering, but they also shared how the resilience within the culture aided in coping with trauma and facilitated activism. Summer and Jenny shared their views on the benefits of resilience within the culture.

So I feel like together there's this community in which you feel safe and you feel like you can be yourself and you feel like you're surrounded by people that hold the same values as you do. And in that way you are stronger, so you can make more of an impact. (Summer)

because so many people come from backgrounds of trauma, I think that there's a lot of emotional labor done, um, and expected to be done in helping one another heal from whatever particular traumas, um, are available. (Jenny)

Connectedness and a sense of belonging has shown to be beneficial in coping with the negative effects of minority stress (Frost & Meyer, 2012; Meyer, 2003). Participants' explanations of resilience highlight the existence of both individual and collective

sources of resilience (Meyer, 2015).

Western views of meritocracy and individualism (Hobfoll, 1998) emphasize a sense of personal success over adversity, which, by definition, is the central tenet of resilience. From an intersectional framework, an individualistic view of resilience does not encompass those whose identities are oppressed by systems and institutions of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Systems of inequality do not provide the same opportunity structure (i.e., the social, economic, and political structures that make success possible in society; Merton, 1968) for resilience for those of marginalized status as those in the dominant culture.

Community resilience (i.e., how communities aid individuals in order to benefit, develop, and support well-being despite adversity; Hall & Zautra, 2010), however, seeks to improve these opportunity structures to facilitate resilience among minority groups (Meyer, 2015). From this framework, we can conceptualize community or culture as a network providing resources that help in-group members cope with systems of inequality and disadvantage, thereby integrating resiliency theory into intersectionality. Exploring and identifying resiliency factors in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals from a community or cultural perspective is warranted.

Culture of support and survival. The combination of this cultural group being formed based on acceptance, shared hardships, and resilience created a strong sense of support within the LGBTQ+ culture. Jenny shared that the LGBTQ+ culture is a, “system of mutual aid.” Kendra echoed this and expressed that the culture was a, “network of people that help each other out, even if you don’t know each other personally.” Jenny

continued to share the notion of support within the culture.

people are willing to do what they can for other queer people that they might not necessarily even know. Uh, but like if you hear that someone needs a couch to surf on, I...in my experience people have been willing to open up their doors to other queer people, um, to provide them limited housing. Uh, for trans women specifically, like, whenever someone can't afford to get, um, an update on their...or a refill on their prescription, um, for hormones specifically since that's a lot of trans women do take hormones, um. People are really willing to share and pitch in when someone doesn't have enough and there's this sort of expectation that, um, we're all going to struggle at some point, and so you help now and in the future you will also be helped. (Jenny)

Seattle and Kendra furthered this theme by sharing how the LGBTQ+ culture is a safe space and an environment of protection from oppression (Fraser, 2008; Institute of Medicine, 2011; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; LeBeau & Jellison, 2009).

It's this network of support. You go into it feeling like these are people who have some inherent level of trustworthiness because they're the same as me and they face the same issues as me...a community that you can engage with and feel like you're not going to be persecuted for um, same-gender attraction, for transgender orientation or you know, for things like that. (Kendra)

one idea was like the self-protective or self-defensive nature of the...the community. They want to like, help um, people that are a part of that culture and...and defend them from persecution. (Seattle)

Sexual minority's emphasis on the culture being a safe space and "system of mutual aid" was consistent with past research suggesting those in the LGBTQ+ community have a sense of duty to support one another (Adams et al., 2014; Fraser, 2008). Connection with the LGBTQ+ community and culture could foster a sense of belonging and self-worth thereby contributing to psychological health and resilience (Meyer, 2015; Riggle et al., 2008). Kwon (2013) posited that social support specific to one's in-group can lead to a stronger sense of connection with the LGBTQ+ community and culture, which may provide a buffer to minority stress.

Overall, the themes presented above fostered the idea of the LGBTQ+ culture as a “culture of survival,” echoing sexual minorities resilience within a heterodominant society. Amadi exclaimed, “we are still here and we are still surviving!”

I think it’s an expression of uh struggle and survival... despite the struggle, these people are so strong, they are so expressive of who they are, and they can still dance and have fun... So I think that it expresses what the culture is. It’s a culture that is so lovely and beautiful with colors, and music, and fashion, and or whatnot... but it is also, within it, telling you stories of survival, of ya know... of people just being who they are and loving themselves irrespective. (Amadi)

I would say that the culture is um, it’s built around people of LGBT orientation who are trying to survive—in some instances literally, you know, facing violence—and thrive while being true to their self and their um, their gender and sexual identities. (Kendra)

I think that LGBTQ culture is necessarily always about survival. Um, not just for the individual but for, uh, like community and a sense of solidarity. (Jenny)

Jenny’s statement that the culture emphasized collectivism in its pursuit for survival connects back to the ideas of community resilience (Hall & Zautra, 2010). Additionally, it proposes that sexual identity is not only an individual identity, but also a collective identity.

Collective and cultural identity. While participants described their individual sexual identity processes, sexual minorities also described the phenomenon of identifying with a larger collective or cultural identity. Pega shared her experience in shifting from an individual perspective of sexual identity, to a collective perspective of sexual identity where she considers her community or collective identity.

in like, high school, [it] became, “Oh! You know, I would like to date girls! Okay, what does that mean for me? What does that mean for how I navigate that?” You know, and then it was also like, “Oh! You know, I have other friends who identify as being open to dating people of the same gender. What does that mean for our group identity? (Pega)

Sexual identity development traditionally has focused on the individual process of exploring and committing to a sexual identity (Cass, 1979). While focusing on the individual's sexual identity development is highly important and central to the process, it leaves out the idea that sexual minorities are part of a larger social group (Cox & Gallous, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1997). Participants shared their views and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals being a part of a larger collective, or as Jenny says, "families of choice."

it's important to me to ummm... have a sense of community with other like-minded people who have had these same experiences ummm... obviously not exactly the same because no one's story is the same as another person's... but having the common like we are all living in a heteronormative society. Ummm we are going against that.... yeah and having other people to lean on and a sense of community is important. (Lexi)

When people tell me, you know, "Hey, I'm gay." I'm no longer like, "Oh!"... Now it's just like, "Okay cool," like, "Me too!" like we are in this together and this is so cool! (Moana)

Sexual minorities experience both internal conflict during sexual identity development as well as systematic oppression within a heterodominant patriarchal society. Sexual minorities' shared experiences of perseverance in spite of institutions that promote heterosexism give them characteristics and qualities that they reference to create a sense of collective identity. Sexual minorities' experiences in this study contradict findings by O'Byrne et al. (2014), in which participants suggested that the only commonality that formed the culture was a same-sex attraction or non-heterosexual identity. Jenny and Alex spoke of identifying with a larger culture group with common values and experiences.

for me it's more about like...I don't know how to put it...like the dynamic of the

culture. So, more about connecting with each other, and um, kind of like having a shared sense of value and that kind of thing. (Alex)

I still gravitate towards other queer people because there's that shared lived experience that gives us a common vocabulary and, uh, culture to reference. (Jenny)

Thus, sexual identity development is not solely a personal identity process, but also a process of identifying with a larger cultural group. Sexton et al. (2018) found that sexual minorities placed emphasis on a collective identity among LGBTQ+ people involving ideas and shared experiences. According to participants, connecting with the culture is important in developing a sense of collective identity. Goltz (2014) found that millennial sexual minorities did not believe the LGBTQ+ community to be an important element in their sexual identity development and viewed the community to be “more constricting than liberating” (p. 1519). However, sexual minority emerging adults in this sample expressed a great deal of interest and strive to be a part of the culture. Alex shared, “I mean for me it's like, really critical to at least have some sort of connection to community and culture.”

Identification and having a sense of belonging with a cultural group is a facilitator in order to access resources from community resilience. Research demonstrates the importance of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community which is associated with strong connections with other sexual minorities and having access to positive role models (Riggle et al., 2008; Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011; Rostosky et al., 2010). These findings combined with the findings of the current study suggests that the LGBTQ+ culture goes beyond traditional ideas of community or culture requiring a sense of physical location (Ridge, Minichiello, & Plummer, 1997). Although, Alex expressed

how the concepts of community and culture were conflated, which was primarily due to defining a sense of culture through connection with the LGBTQ+ community.

Alex: For me I...I can't get a sense of culture without being part of the community, so it's really important to me to like, be in that, in a way.

J: They usually talk about the community as like...they refer to the LGBTQ community, they don't talk about a culture. Um, and so, which I feel like...has its ups and downs about it, like it has its positives and negatives about it, um. What are, what are your thoughts on that?

Alex: Yeah I mean I think it's really hard to disentangle the two ideas. Like I can see them as separate things, but yeah they're just, they're not quite as distinct in my mind as maybe we would kind of talk about it. Um, I don't think it's a bad thing. I think like, the fact that when we think about LGBTQ culture, what most people end up talking about is community, speaks to what the culture is, if that makes sense. Like, the culture is that we kind of like band together and have this community because we've had to. Right? Because we've been otherized and so having a community and a group and like, feeling part of that I think is part of the culture and that's why they get brought up together so often.

Although other participants expressed connection with the culture regardless of location or interaction with the community, Alex's experience reflects that sexual minorities may find a strong sense of belongingness with the culture by connecting with the community. Alex's experience also suggests that the LGBTQ+ community and identification with this community is integral to a sense of connection with the broader LGBTQ+ culture. Adapted from Sue's (2001) model of personal identity, findings posit that sexual identity development has three levels of identification: (a) individual, (b) social, (c) cultural (Figure 2).

Individual identity. The individual level of sexual identity development is consistent with models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979) that convey a process

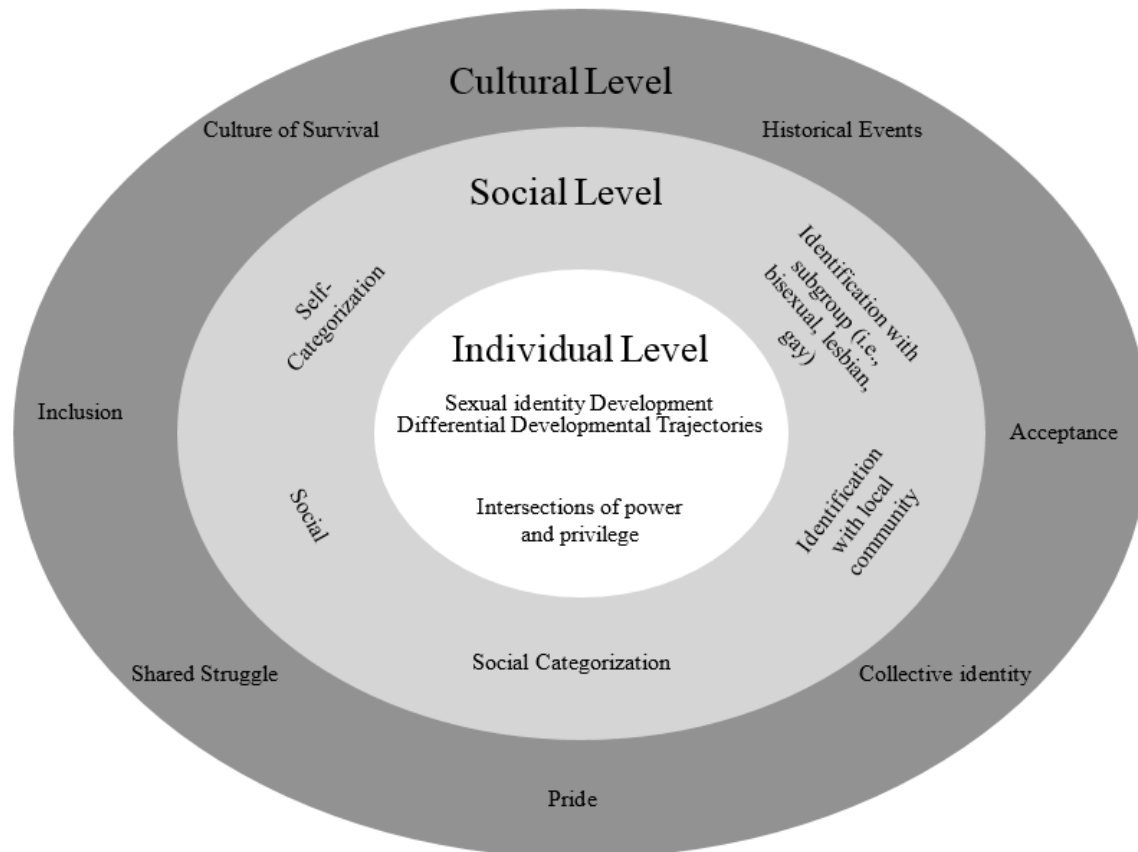


Figure 2. LGBTQ+ Adaptation of Sue's (2001) model of personal identity.

of awareness, confusion, exploration, coming out, commitment, and integration of sexual identity into one's self-concept. This level is highlighted and expanded upon by the differential developmental trajectories model (Savin-Williams, 2005) that emphasizes flexibility and acknowledges that sexual identity is not always a linear progression or lockstep process. Consistent with the differential developmental trajectories model and some tenets of intersectionality, individual levels of sexual identity formation are influenced by unique characteristics and impacted by the different intersecting identities and systems of oppression that may impact sexual identity milestones.

Social identity. Social identity levels of sexual identity formation involve the

process of belonging with the LGBTQ+ community, social categorization as a group member (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), and identification with a specific subgroup within the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, queer, LGBTQ+ person of color). Social levels of sexual identity also stress the importance of recognizing the processes of individual sexual identity and social identification with the LGBTQ+ community that are, at times, in tandem (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Social identification with the LGBTQ+ community or social group also involves knowledge of shared characteristics or values that allow sexual minorities to differentiate and socially compare between in-group and out-group members.

Cultural identity. The cultural identity level of sexual identity development consists of having a sense of shared values and beliefs that bring about a larger global identification and sense of connection with other sexual minorities. Shared values and beliefs of the culture also inform sexual minorities of collectivistic movements and goals that help maintain the LGBTQ+ culture. Sexual minorities are not just identifying with the LGBTQ+ community or subcommunities but are also aware of a broader LGBTQ+ culture that emphasizes acceptance, survival, resilience, pride, LGBTQ+ historical events, and social justice.

Cultural identity among sexual minorities is consistent with Sue and Sue's (2012) model of cultural identity development. Given sexual minorities are originally raised within the heterodominant culture that stresses heterosexism, the sexual minority begins their cultural identity development in a stage of conformity with heterodominant cultural values and beliefs. Dissonance is experienced when the sexual minority begins to

integrate information from the LGBTQ+ culture that contradicts cultural values of the heterosexual culture. Beliefs and values of the heterodominant culture are questioned and ultimately rejected, leading to the sexual minority no longer identifying with the dominant culture. Identification and a sense of belongingness with the LGBTQ+ culture increases and the sexual minority begins to integrate the values and beliefs of the LGBTQ+ culture into their self-concept and sense of self. Lastly, sexual minorities' awareness of LGBTQ+ cultural values fosters a sense of connection regardless of location and promotes social action and reform towards institutions that oppress sexual minorities.

Other characteristics of LGBTQ+ culture. While the ideas of acceptance, shared experiences, resilience, and survival were the basis of the culture and creating a sense of cultural identity, participants described many other characteristics and shared beliefs represented within the culture. Subthemes included: Liberation, Striving for Equality and Social Action, Pride and Celebration, LGBTQ+ History and Cultural Events, and Inclusion.

Liberation. Sexual minorities expressed that being a member of the LGBTQ+ culture, as well as the culture itself, was a place of liberation. Amadi expressed, "I feel free, like, freedom.... you know there's a lot of liberation within the community, you know, within the culture." Lexi shared that the culture, "gives you more like a sense of power to define like your own identity. And, like who you want to meet, and what you want to do in your life." From this, the culture promoted a sense of freedom and the ability to break from heterosexual scripts of living so sexual minorities could create their

own life path. Summer shared her experience, “I just kind of feel like, as far as I’ve been exposed, there is no standard, it’s just that it’s all accepted, whether it’s traditional, non-traditional, or anything on the spectrum.” Squid described that, one of the big values for the LGBT community is “I guess being willing to shake things up. Being willing to look at things from a fresh perspective.” Other participants expressed similar experiences.

We have, we have to develop that ability to be like, “Yeah you can do whatever you want!” Um, and like, “Follow your own path.” And like, you can get married, you can not get married, you can, you know have kids, not have kids, like, do...do what is you. Not what they expect you to do kind of thing. (Alex)

it would be awkward for a straight man... who is successful, good looking, rich, and not wanting to have like a family or kids. It would be like “hmmm, that’s weird.” But within the, within the LGBTQ culture that is like “okay that is fine.” If you want to get married, okay. That’s fine. Like, there’s opportunity to be different even within the culture. (Amadi)

be able to be free. Freely who you are. Freely who, who you identify as. Ummm, and to be able to be accepted and have the value that you deserve and the worth that you have as a person and as an individual, no matter what your identities are or what identity intersections you hold. (Oscar)

Experiences of liberation and freedom expressed by the participants reflect the notion that there is no standard or “carved path” within the LGBTQ+ culture. In past research, participants interviewed by Riggle et al. (2008) expressed that a positive aspect of having a non-heterosexual identity is the ability to not conform to traditional gender roles or life paths rooted in heterosexism. Amadi described his experience of shifting his thinking from heterosexist assumptions of gender to a liberated point of view promoted through the LGBTQ+ culture.

I use to think like a very masculine man would date like a very feminine man... But I mean I’ve obviously just... bringing my heteronormative thinking into the, into the gay culture... Um, I mean now I’m... it’s just two human beings who are in love. They don’t have to be one masculine, one feminine, or one feminine one

masculine, or whatever. They can both be masculine. They can both be feminine. They can... who cares about what roles they play. (Amadi)

Striving for equality and social action. Participants all expressed interest in social advocacy during their interviews. Sexual minorities described that the culture was strongly connected to social action, increasing visibility, and striving for equality. Jenny commented that the LGBTQ+ culture is centered around, “making space in a heterosexual society.” Oscar echoed this and shared that the LGBTQ+ culture has a, “constant striving to be heard and to have space and to have a place in society.” Oliver I shared that their experience with the LGBTQ+ culture and the importance of acknowledging its existence.

it’s important to me because it is still so socially relevant. Like that people are still trying to deny it even exists, and that even today it’s still like being held as something that can be changed or can be like pushed down, or can be like held and controlled... It’s important to me in that sense that like it’s something worth fighting for. I think that was what I was trying to get to... it’s that like... because it is so politically relevant and trying to be put down, it’s important to me because I want to make sure that doesn’t happen. (Oliver I)

Oliver I described how the LGBTQ+ culture is still socially relevant and worth advocating for as a way to bring visibility to the culture. Through this notion, denying the existence of the LGBTQ+ culture exacerbates the invisibility and silencing of an already marginalized group. Jenny, Oscar, and Alex continued to share experiences of the LGBTQ+ culture seeking change within a heterodominant society.

I’d say that the biggest ideal I commonly see within LGBTQ culture is a sort of hope for social transformation... ultimately I think that so much of the ideals of queer culture are built around the idea that a better world is possible and that, uh, not only is it possible, it’s one that is desperately needed and has to be pursued. (Jenny)

I think like kind of activism and like, um, obviously like equality is a big part of

the value system and like. I'd like to think that there's a big piece of that that's like intersectional in nature, um, where we're trying to like really, kind of like expand our understand of how to live within a kind of like multicultural frame in a way that's like helpful for people. (Alex)

Participants continued to express how the LGBTQ+ culture was a “culture of advocacy” (Walter). Sexual minorities expressed how being a member of a minority group promoted openness as well as social justice and advocacy of others.

I just kind of feel like it's a group of people that band together, not just because they have this one thing that relates to them and bonds them, but because together they're stronger to fight for, like...I feel like our rights and equal treatment is the most important thing. (Summer)

So like having that experience of being LGBT I... I would say gives a person more confidence... And just like a deeper understanding of what it means to be in a minority group and need to fight more to be seen. (Lexi)

individuals who don't participate in cultural appropriation, who um, have an understanding of, or at least like the basic understandings and willing to learn social justice, because I do think that if you are part of a minority group you really should be up to terms with social justice. You should know what's what on what! Like, you definitely shouldn't be, um, participating in the oppression of others. (Moana)

Participants demonstrated that sexual identity, specifically being a member of a minority group and possessing a sense of collective identity, was used as a mechanism for resistance and social reform (Wagaman, 2016). Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone (2016) suggested that due to shared experiences of hardship and oppression, the concept of the LGBTQ+ community and culture has been connected with social justice. Kendra and Seattle also connected the LGBTQ+ culture to a liberal affiliated political identity that influenced goals of social justice.

[I] believe that most of us are very liberal. That's one tenet that seems to pop up constantly. That there's people, these are people who believe in women's rights, who believe in reproduction rights, who believe in gender reass...uh, gender

rights, and especially trans rights, people who believe in more social welfare programs. (Kendra)

Um, well the first thing that comes to mind I guess is the uh, you know, politically active social justice worker... the champions of those communities are those who are um, politically active or participating in um, non-profit groups that are trying to advance causes for either LGBT groups or other marginalized groups. (Seattle)

Participants described the LGBTQ+ culture as invested in social advocacy that aimed for equality not only for themselves, but for others as well (Asakura, 2016). Riggle et al. (2008) and DiFulvio (2011) found that sexual minorities believed qualities of altruism and engaging in social justice to be positive aspects of their sexual identity that gave them a sense of meaning in their lives.

LGBTQ+ history and pride. Participants expressed how knowledge or awareness of LGBTQ+ history was important in order to be connected with the LGBTQ+ culture. Understanding the persecution and resilience of sexual minorities throughout history was integral in identifying LGBTQ+ culture as a culture and its importance to the community.

I found a lot of meaning in... in researching more of the historical aspects of the LGBT culture. I've been immersing myself in a lot of media on Stonewall Riots... I find myself often times turning to history when I'm looking at that culture and trying to take pride in, to some degree. (Squid)

I think when thinking about a culture, I think the, at least the historical ummm, events that we know of.... Within gay rights and gay movements... I think there are important pieces that are ummm important in defining it as a culture. Ummm, I think that's... that's kinda get a lot of like my, by defining it as a powerful source of resiliency and um, resistance in a lot of ways. (Oscar)

I would say that the culture at large is one of reclaiming, rediscovering, recontextualization. Right? Cause I think that a lot of queer culture and a lot of queer history has been very much buried over the years, so I think that a lot of queer culture now in 2017 is about refinding that, reclaiming that, sort of rediscovering because I think that's one of the issues with horizontal identities is that they get sort of pushed aside or buried or erased very easily. (Pega)

Past research suggests that engagement with LGBTQ+ history is a mechanism to facilitate resiliency and connection with the LGBTQ+ community (Asakura, 2016). These findings partially contradict previous research by Weststrate and McLean (2010) who found that sexual minorities in younger cohorts reported more personal memories (i.e., coming out) and less cultural memories centered around politics and other external events than older generations. Weststrate and McLean (2010) suggested that this demonstrated how LGBTQ+ identities have become less culturally defined over time and have slowly become assimilated into the mainstream culture (Goltz, 2014). However, the LGBTQ+ millennials in this study were actually well versed in LGBTQ+ history and articulated how that history has influenced the culture. At the same time though, many of the participants admitted to not knowing enough about the history, even stating that the current generation of sexual minorities may take the history for granted.

Sexual minorities found LGBTQ+ historical events important to the roots of the culture. Historical events, such as the Stonewall Riots of 1969, were of particular importance in formulating the LGBTQ+ culture and the annual cultural event of Pride. Pride allowed sexual minorities to celebrate the existence of LGBTQ+ culture and the identity as a cultural group (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Mueller, 2004). Jenny shared that, “Pride marches are seen as one of the integral cultural experiences, um, that LGBTQ people share.” Other participants shared similar experiences with the cultural phenomenon of Pride.

I think Pride is like the most fun time of the year. Getting to dress up in rainbow and go to parties. Ummm, just be proud of who you are and that you’re able to be in this community of awesome people. (Lexi)

I love Pride. I love like these very flamboyant and out there sort of like ummm, events and activities and the flag being so out there and bright. Because like ya know... I think a part of our culture is... we are trying to bring attention of the fact that we're here. Ummm, we're existing and we deserve rights, and we deserve attention. (Oscar)

Amadi, however, expressed frustrations about others lack of knowledge around Pride and why it was celebrated. Specifically, Amadi expressed how members of the heterosexual culture were the least knowledgeable of Pride and what it represented.

No one talks about the struggles. No one talks about why there is Pride and why this should matter to everyone... this is about recognizing Stonewall, and how many people have died, how many people are still dying... This is to show that their lives matter and they are valued. And that their lives have value. (Amadi)

As Amadi shared, Pride was not only a current celebration of the LGBTQ+ culture but was also a celebration of the Stonewall Riots and awareness of LGBTQ+ marginalization and persecution. Overall, sexual minorities expressed that Pride, the Stonewall Riots, and the passing of major equality acts for LGBTQ+ people, as cultural events that were key to LGBTQ+ culture and its existence.

Knowledge and awareness of LGBTQ+ history and cultural events appeared to cultivate a sense of pride. Oscar described the concept of pride through the unique experience of his identity as a Mexican man, drawing parallels between the process of developing pride in his ethnic identity and sexual identity as similar. Oscar expressed how pride was produced from his individual identity but was also created from a historical and sociopolitical lens of what his community has faced.

I think it comes with a historical, political, social, history there of all the difficulty that my community and my ummm and my Mexican community has experienced that I want to say that and claim that label and claim the identity to be proud of it. (Oscar)

Sexual minorities highlighted the theme of pride being a strong component within the culture. Pega shared her feelings of pride and how the culture should be celebrated, “a lot of the queer community is around meeting other queer people for the sake of sort of either celebrating um, defiance of heteronormativity.” Pride was also expressed as a phenomenon associated with resilience. Amadi shared, “if the world doesn’t accept us, we will accept ourselves and celebrate ourselves.” Oliver I and Oliver II described the cultural phenomenon of Pride festivals and how this was a cultural event to celebrate one’s sexual identity.

I think... aptly it’s probably a sense of trying to be proud of who you are, because you are told not to for so long... And that is... why we have Pride and stuff like that. But um... because that’s one of the one things that everyone, again, in the community experiences is someone telling them like... you’re not, or you’re lesser than, or you’re not enough... and a lot of people believe that. (Oliver I)

I think one of the things that at least I see being a common theme in LGBT communities is the concept of being open and honest about who you are and embracing that identity rather than hiding it so, it’s like about being proud of who you are. That’s why we have Pride festivals, that’s like...our thing is being proud of who we are, despite the fact that we are not the typical societal norm. (Oliver II)

Questioning the concept of culture. Although participants named a variety of characteristics, norms, and ideals of the LGBTQ+ culture that were consistent with previous studies (Adams et al., 2014; Fraser, 2008; Riggle et al., 2008), many participants also questioned if the culture adhered to traditional definitions of culture.

I can’t help but wonder if the LGBTQ community HAS a culture. Culture develops when you cram a bunch of people together and make them interact. With racial minorities, a lot of people live together when they’re part of the same group. But with LGBTQ individuals...we’re not so marginalized that we’re forced to all live in the same neighborhood. I think that there are big events and media that can help to create culture when LGBTQ people get together, but I think we’re hard pressed to have a true culture, especially when the LGBTQ

community is more focused on difference over similarity. I think that creates an interesting circumstance for us. (Squid)

I think it's unfair to call it one culture. Um, I mean its...there's an umbrella there but I think it is, um, not separated but...I mean there are, are distinguishable you know, subsets of...of the culture. (Seattle)

trying to pull out these major underlying factors of traditions... I think it is tricky because it's such a diverse group of course. It's such a, there's so many different individuals and nuances... and it's such an umbrella term that... it truly, it's, it encompasses so many people. (Oscar)

Participants discussed how LGBTQ+ culture was a highly diverse group due to different sexual orientations, gender identities, and the numerous intersecting identities that form their self-concept (Woodiel & Cowdery, 2013), thereby resisting the use of an identity “gloss” (Trimble & Dickson, 2005). As a result, participants found it tricky to call it one culture due to its highly diverse qualities, creating discourse with common LGBTQ+ cultural qualities and values presented earlier. Oliver II shared their experience taking a sociology course regarding gender and sexuality and how class discussions of the LGBTQ+ community brought up the concept of *communities*.

there are so many different things like, so many different identities that make up what it is to be LGBT, that we ended up using the phrase LGBT communities plural to describe how like, it isn't just one big gay bubble that we're all in, it's a lot of different people doing a lot of different things and really the only unifying factor is that we are not taking part in like, the concept of heteronormativity, at least as much as we can. (Oliver II)

Oliver II and other participants are stressing that sexual minorities are highly diverse and do not have the same experiences. Oliver II's comment about *communities* highlights the different communities within the broader LGBTQ+ culture that shape their individual experiences (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer). Some participants did not question the culture's existence, but rather questioned if the culture had any truly

normative behaviors or beliefs due to its diversity in members.

I don't think there is a normative behavior or belief system within the LGBTQ culture.... there are so many different people and cultures that there is not really a normative behavior or belief because there is a diverse array of people. (Amadi)

I think that I don't even know if I could pinpoint one ideal and say that, "This is what...this is one thing that all LGBT culture like agrees with." Because I feel like there's just so much diversity within the community. (Moana)

Participants believed that the LGBTQ+ culture too diverse to have norms shared throughout the culture. Although findings from the current study demonstrate a culture where sexual minorities have similar values, it also is a culture of difference and diversity. Amadi continued to emphasize that the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ culture embraces a recognition of diversity.

I think it is a culture that recognizes difference and diversity.... A place that embraces all kinds of people, with differing sexual orientations or gender identities... It's a mix of different beliefs and different cultures. (Amadi)

It is important to note the different intersecting identities and diversity among this population and that not all LGBTQ+ individuals are the same. The unifying finding in this theme was that sexual minorities believed the LGBTQ+ culture was multifaceted and consisted of a wide-array of diverse identities and experiences (Woodiel & Cowdery, 2013). While grouping all sexual minorities into a unified LGBTQ+ culture has the potential to promote monolithic assumptions and ignore intragroup distinctions (Feinstein, Dyar, & London, 2016; Sexton et al., 2017), participants provided many characteristics that encompass the culture and are shared among other sexual minorities.

The above findings pose that the LGBTQ+ culture does not conform to traditional forms and definitions of culture due to the diversity among its members and absence of

normative practices that are consistent in other definitions of culture. Instead, LGBTQ+ culture is known as a culture of difference and diversity while creating a system of support among like-minded individuals (Holt, 2011). The LGBTQ+ culture embraces diversity and creates a space for sexual and gender minorities of various intersecting identities to band together based on history, shared experiences, and common values.

Discrimination within the culture. Despite the plethora of positive aspects sexual minorities described about the LGBTQ+ culture, many participants expressed their frustrations with experiencing discrimination inside the culture itself. Amadi shared, “There are people who ostracize and discriminate people within the same community as well.” Participants shared the multiple forms of discrimination and oppression they experienced or witnessed within the LGBTQ+ culture.

Biphobia. A great deal of participants, especially those who identified as bisexual, shared experiences of biphobia and binegativity. Some bisexually identified participants described experiences of exclusion and alienation from the rest of the culture. Squid shared, “I realized that bisexual people in particular have to intentionally form a community. It doesn’t just happen.” Participants attributed this partially to the binegative views and experiences of having their bisexual identity invalidated by fellow sexual minorities.

I feel like the biggest area that I’ve dis...faced discrimination in is the pansexual versus bisexual debate, and whether or not bisexuality is still a valid identity. Um, a lot of people will say that pansexuality is, I don’t know, I guess Bisexuality 2.0, is how somebody described it... What it does it...it erases bisexuality in the present and pansexuality in the past. It...it claims that pansexuality or the experience of pansexuality has no history, is essentially what that’s saying. Yeah, the term may be new, I think I was reading something that it didn’t really...that it started to gain traction in 2013... so here we are today, um, and you have

pansexuality saying, “Man, like bisexual people were just pansexual all along.” Um, and you have bisexual people telling pansexual people, like, “Man, you’re just trying to be different. You’re just trying to come up with a new word and you’re complicating this.” And I know that I have had those feelings in the past, um, myself, towards pansexual individuals, so seeing as I have had those prejudices myself, I know they exist. Um, I know that there are other people who think like me and...that’s frustrating. (Squid)

I know that my friends and people online as well as myself have experienced um, what comes with being bisexual, which is like, that...that narrative that like we receive prejudice from both sides. Because many people within the LGBTQ community kind of believe that, “Well, it’s a phase,” or, “You can’t pick a side,” or, “You’re just transitioning into fully being homosexual.” Um, and I’ve definitely received a lot of, just like, side-comments and stuff that it’s probably just a phase because I’m in college, etc., etc. (Summer)

Summer and Squid’s experiences of biphobia and binegativity primarily centered around invalidation of their sexual identity. Research suggests that bisexual individuals may have less connection with the LGBTQ+ community compared to lesbians and gay men (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Others found that bisexuals may experience other sexual minorities rejecting their bisexual identity and claiming it as a “phase” (Dodge & Sanford, 2006). Discrimination and encountering binegativity could also be dependent on the relationship the bisexual individual is currently in (i.e., same-sex partnership or heterosexual partnership). Kendra expressed her frustrations of how she has experienced invalidation of her bisexual identity due to her relationship with a man.

Um, some people say, you know, if you’re...if you’re bisexual or you’re transgender and you’re in a heterosexual relationship, you shouldn’t be a part of the core community. So there’s...there’s a lot of bickering about who’s in the club, which I...I find is a little, um, distasteful. It puts a bad taste in my mouth. (Kendra)

Bisexual individuals continue to report encountering biphobia from both the heterosexual culture and LGBTQ+ culture, especially when currently in a different sex

partnership (Dodge et al., 2012; Friedman et al., 2014; Molina et al., 2015; Wandrey, Mosack, & Moore, 2015). Experiences of discrimination from both the heterosexual and LGBTQ+ culture could be associated with bisexual individuals feeling alienated and marginalized from both cultures. Wandrey et al. suggested that bisexual women felt marginalized by both the LGBTQ+ and heterosexual culture. Heath and Mulligan (2008) found that lesbian women had stronger feelings of connection with the LGBTQ+ community compared to bisexual women. Experiencing further devaluation and invisibility in both the dominant heterosexist culture and the LGBTQ+ culture may impact bisexual individual's mental health. Targeting binegativity and challenging these beliefs at a community or cultural level should be a focus for clinicians, intervention researchers, and social justice advocates.

Acephobia. Sexual minorities also shared witnessing or hearing negative attitudes towards asexuality (i.e., acephobia). Seattle stated that within the LGBTQ+ culture, there is, “some tensions there with... with asexuality.” Both Oliver I and Oliver II both described the negative attitudes towards asexuality found within the culture.

Asexuality is a big... it's been a big topic of debate... people thinking Asexual people don't belong in the community... because um, being Asexual, you still can be cisgender and hetero-romantic or just like “cis het” in some way. And in that sense, you would technically be the oppressor... and in that sense... you shouldn't belong or take community resources away from people who are actually queer. (Oliver I)

I see a lot of biphobia and acephobia within the LGBT community because it isn't even like the typical gay identity, it's seen as something that goes against even norms that are set by the LGBT community. (Oliver II)

While there has been increased visibility of asexuality within the LGBTQ+ community, asexuality still appears to be ostracized and discriminated against (Chasin,

2015). Individuals who identify as asexual face unique challenges pertaining to their sexual identity (e.g., pathologizing low sexual desire as possible symptoms of depression) that are perpetuated within the heterodominant society as well as the LGBTQ+ culture (Chasin, 2015; MacInnis & Hodson, 2012). Research on asexuality, their sexual identity development, and experiences with discrimination are lacking within the field of psychology and should be further explored.

Transphobia. Sexual minorities also discussed the prevalence of transphobia and exclusion of transgender and gender minorities within the LGBTQ+ culture. Kendra shared that “transgender people, I feel like, possibly have it the worst in the community.” Squid shared, “I mean, I also see transphobia happen.” Kendra continued to share experiences of witnessing transphobia within the LGBTQ+ culture.

I’ve been following this person for a very long time, so it’s probably like seven...seven years later, now the person’s identity has evolved um into a transgender female to male um, and that he is in a...a um, relationship with a man. So, he posts a lot of his experiences within the community and kind of exclusionary things that he faces. So there’s this idea that if you are a trans man, you’re not a “true man” whatever that means. (Kendra)

Some sexual minorities also described how transgender and gender nonconforming individuals experience a “lot of sorta rejection and just not feeling they have a space within those communities” (Oscar). Alex shared, “I guess the only piece that like sometimes feels weird is that I — or that doesn’t fit quite as well [with the LGBTQ+ culture] — is the gender piece.” Transgender and gender nonconforming individuals face a great deal of discrimination (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Previous research found that some advocates had trouble including transgender identities into the LGBTQ+ community and social activism movements (Stone; 2009). More research needs to

examine experiences of in-group discrimination among these subcommunities to understand the potentially marginalization transgender and gender nonconforming individuals face.

Gatekeeping. Sexual minorities also described feelings of exclusion and that the LGBTQ+ culture had members that sought to be “gatekeepers” to decide who was in the community and who was not. Kendra shared, “It’s like this constant back and forth of who gets to be in the club.” Several participants expressed their frustrations regarding exclusion within the culture.

still not understanding each other, even though we’re all a part of a community and all share some sort of common identity... that ummm discrimination is still there. And there’s some aspects within people in the community and attitudes within the community that they are either supposed to be gate-keeping or they’re supposed to be ummmm... like a limited access of resources or that like some people shouldn’t belong. (Oliver I)

it can be troubling when a community that’s supposed to be based on like, pride and being open about who you are, whoever you are, to have still that kind of like...gatekeeping...you have to still fit this kind of mold mentality... it does make it difficult for people who don’t fit the typical like gay or queer mold to fit in and feel accepted. (Oliver II)

Feeling excluded from the LGBTQ+ culture or feeling “not LGBTQ+” enough is consistent within the literature, specifically with bisexual individuals (Bradford, 2004).

Kendra expressed frustrations of witnessing exclusion within the LGBTQ+ culture.

And I...I almost consider people like that to be not part of the community, because they’re not living up to the ideals that I’m expecting of them. So you hold their beliefs, you may identify with our community, but you’re not holding up our core tenets... are you really in our community if you can’t be accepting? (Kendra)

Kendra’s frustrations with the LGBTQ+ culture is primarily due to the discrepancy between the act of excluding others from the community while the LGBTQ+

culture simultaneously holds beliefs of inclusion and acceptance. Despite the LGBTQ+ culture promoting inclusion and their culture centering around the value of acceptance, there are actions of exclusion occurring within the culture that directly contradict and violate these values. Violations of these values brings forth uncertainty of whether the community is always considered a “safe space” and fosters a sense of doubt in the LGBTQ+ culture as a system of unconditional support (Fraser, 2008).

Other forms of oppression. Some participants expressed there were discriminatory remarks focused around body image and masculinity and femininity. Amadi shared his experiences on dating apps, saying, “like if people demand, “Masc only”... and I’m like, ‘What the fuck does that mean?’ (*Laughs*). Like, what are you gonna do with that anyways?” Amadi and Seattle share these experiences of discrimination among sexual minority men, primarily within the dating scene.

People say things like they are not into Blacks. And I’m just like, Ohhh... (*laughs*)... some people say things like, “Oh, no black, no fems, no fat”... So that’s very discriminatory. If, if I was a very fat person, or if I was, um, a very effeminate person, I would feel like there is something wrong with me, right? The person who is discriminated because they are effeminate, shouldn’t have to come to a gay space and not be afraid to be effeminate. (Amadi)

There’s an odd norm or thought about behavior between like masculine gay men and effeminate gay men. I see like, more effeminate men feeling very judged for being effeminate and seeing more masculine gay men as the norm, and I see more masculine gay men feeling like...uh, being effeminate and gay is the norm. (Seattle)

Similar to research on femiphobia and the importance of masculinity among gay men, sexual minority men, at times, engage in internalized heterosexism and homophobia centered around violation of masculine gender roles (Clark & Smith, 2015; Taywaditep, 2002). Specifically, these heterosexist notions promote conformity to masculine gender

role ideologies and devalue and stigmatize those who are feminine presenting and do not conform to masculine ideals. Research has reported that sexual minority men stigmatize those who do not conform to beauty standards and body image ideals (Clark & Smith, 2015; Fraser, 2008).

LGBTQ+ people of color. Although sexual minorities described the LGBTQ+ culture as inclusive of diversity, experiences of racism and oppression of ethnic and racial minorities were still present in the culture. Participants who identified as LGBTQ+ people of color shared experiences of discrimination that evoked strong feelings of disappointment in the culture. Amadi shared, “a lot of Black people will face a lot more stigma than their White counterparts.” Moana shared, “a lot of white gays tend to culturally appropriate, fetishize uh... skin color.” Ethnic minority participants described their frustrations regarding experiences of racial prejudice within the LGBTQ+ culture.

people of color within um the LGBTQ culture and community, and how their experiences can often also be difficult uh due to racial prejudice or um, just a lot of sorta rejection and just not feeling they have a space within those communities. (Oscar)

when I hear shit about other people of color in the LGBT community, I do take that personally, um, because I definitely think that if you have a vendetta against black people or if you have a vendetta against, um, uh...uh...what is the term?! Like, latin...Latinx people or even just people of color, when I hear that shit, like I take that personal. Because that means you also probably have a vendetta against Polynesian people or Pacific Islanders, I also think it probably means you have a vendetta against, you know, people that I want to have solidarity with. (Moana)

LGBTQ+ people of color face unique experiences of prejudice due to the intersectional nature of facing both heterosexism and racism. Experiencing racism within the LGBTQ+ culture has the potential to bring forth identity conflict between LGBTQ+ people of color’s sexual identity and racial or ethnic identity (Balsam et al., 2011). Other

participants witnessed and experienced other systems of racism within the LGBTQ+ culture.

I still find it hard to make reference to black gay men who are like represented like... When I google or go on instagram and I say gay weddings, I will have to scroll and scroll as I find two black men who are like, you know, like getting married. Um, so there's still a lot to do, even as a minority, you know, within our culture. (Amadi)

Amadi described the lack of LGBTQ+ people of color being represented within the LGBTQ+ culture and in media. Structural racism is a system where policies, institutions, and representation of a given culture interact and perpetuate inequity among racial or ethnic minority groups (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, Abdurrahim, 2012). Amadi's experience of not seeing Black sexual minority men in the media is a form of structural racism by not seeing representation of his racial group within the larger LGBTQ+ culture. Racial and ethnic minorities are at risk for feeling invisible and further marginalized within LGBTQ+ culture due to racism perpetuated within predominately White LGBTQ+ communities (O'Byrne et al., 2014).

Culture is centered on white, cisgender, men. Participants described how ideals within the heterodominant society have seeped into the LGBTQ+ culture. Primarily, sexual minorities shared how the culture privileged and idealized White, cisgender, men. Moana stated, "I need a distinctua— a distinction between White LGBT culture and racialized... er... ethnic LGBT. Because to me, I don't know what White LGBT culture is." Many participants described how they believed that the culture was still centered around White people and lacked representation or acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ people of color.

I have become very aware of my privilege as a white LGBT individual. Um, and so race is not really something that I think conflicts at all. I think that society is very much with me because the faces of the LGBTQ culture are white faces. (Squid)

LGBTQ culture may seem as just a white entity in some instances, ummm, and that a lot of people who do identify as Latino or Latinx and LGBTQ might not feel like those spaces ummm are spaces for people who are also of, people of color who are queer. (Oscar)

Sexual minorities who have intersecting racial or ethnic identities may feel that the LGBTQ+ culture and liberation of the LGBTQ+ community is primarily a White phenomenon that does not include people of color (Sarno et al., 2015). Moreover, Sarno et al. (2015) found that by identifying as a sexual minority, racial and ethnic minorities risked the potential of rejecting their ethnic identity or cultural identity.

Participants acknowledged that LGBTQ+ culture also promoted aspects of patriarchy by centering on cisgender men. Oscar shared, “I mean a lot of times gay identity itself is privileged within the LGBTQ community.” Amadi described, “LGBTQ culture is very... male friendly... when people say “gay people,” they are most likely talking about gay men.” Amadi expressed how the culture was primarily male-centric, which demonstrated the invisibility and omission of other sexual minority groups within the broader culture. LGBTQ+ people of color as well as sexual minority women may not feel a strong sense of belonging to the LGBTQ+ culture compared to White sexual minority men due to the culture’s focus on White cisgender men (Han, 2007). Findings show how racism, sexism, biphobia, and acephobia are unsupportive and restrict the opportunities of minority groups within the LGBTQ+ culture. Restriction of opportunities reduces the ability to access resources through community resilience and promotes

systems of oppression within a culture that values acceptance and inclusion (Meyer, 2015).

Heterosexual Culture

After discussing the LGBTQ+ culture, participants were then asked similar questions regarding heterosexual culture. Participants were amused by the idea of describing the heterodominant culture and had very strong opinions on the topic.

Following an already traveled path. Participants first described the heterosexual culture and heterosexuals as those who follow traditional and prescribed developmental paths. Participants often made jokes regarding heterosexual culture, which Oscar and Moana described as rather dull.

ummm... boring! (laughs) um traditional, dull, ummm... conventional... Me and my friends, my LG, my gay friends and stuff like that... ya know, heterosexual stuff, that's kinda dull... why would you do that? I think that's a response to, ya know... I am glad I am not straight anymore and all this stuff that kinda, like take pride in this identity... I am very happy that I am gay so like... the alternative just kinda sounds like... meh. That's over-done. There's too many heterosexuals. There should be more of us! (laughs) (Oscar)

Heterosexual culture. [laughs] All the things, like, coming to my head first are terrible. They're terrible things, so that's why I'm like [sucks in air through teeth] I don't want to say terrible things. Cuz, that's not nice. Um, heterosexual culture... so when I think of about like, this is funny because my perception of heterosexual culture has a lot to do with my Mormon upbringing.... If you're a woman, you're most likely getting married at 18 and having sex very quietly, missionary, 9pm. (Moana)

Many participants laughed and were perplexed or unsure of how to describe the culture. Lexi contemplated her answer for a while before sharing, “..... ummm the ideal is to get married, umm (*pause*)... yeah, I don't know (laughs).” The conversation always was brought back to the idea of traditions and following an already traveled path.

go to college, graduate, get a good job, get married, have kids, repeat, repeat, repeat, until you die. I kind of feel like it doesn't...it's very standard. (Summer)

I don't even know, like...you know, like have a partner, they should be of the same—er of the opposite sex or gender and like, you should want to get married and have like three kids and like all of this shit... like norm and ideal for heterosexual culture is like the norm and ideal for just like Amer...like America, you know? Like, operate within the capitalist society, like, get a job, marry, have kids, retire at 60, go retire to Florida, you know? (Alex)

there's this sort of model of what it means to be a person, which is that necessarily you go through these set stages of sexual development, um, you're like dating in your teens and participating in, in these sort of dating rituals as established by schools like school dances, or, or just other dating rituals in general. Um, that you settle down and marry the one um, and that, uh, you then have children, raise them, raise them to also follow that same path, um, and in doing so, recreate that culture of heterosexuality. (Jenny)

Adhering to traditional heterosexual life trajectories, such as heterosexist assumptions of marriage and creating the model “nuclear family,” is a cultural practice that is passed down from generation to generation (Ingrahm, 2006; O'Byrne et al., 2014). Sexual minorities also shared that the heterosexual culture emphasized assumptions of heterosexism and conformity to heterosexual scripts of living.

Conformity is also another word I would use for heterosexualism. Um, there's no diversity. I mean there is diversity in terms of skin tone, but...all heterosexual people I swear, I'm like, “Ya'll are just all the same.” (Moana)

I would say heterosexual culture is a lot of assumption. Right? Like, there's a lot of assumptions about, like, “Oh my gosh,” you know, “this four-year-old just kissed this other four-year old. Isn't that cute... There's just a lot of assumption, right, about what the standard life course is going to be. And so I think that that's something that hits parents and families kind of hard when they're kids turn out to be part of the queer culture, is that it's like, “Oh, I was expecting,” you know, “this much more standard course of development. I was expecting,” you know, “you to start dating in high school and having these crushes in middle school, and then I was expecting you to be seriously dating around in college, and then right after college, I was expecting that you would find one or two longer term partners. And I was expecting that you would get married. And I was expecting you'd have kids.” You know, and I feel like each further deviation from that is sort of, um,

startling. (Pega)

J: what is the heterosexual culture?

Summer: Um. [laughs] Um. I guess it's very um, normative. Like, um, you see it in everyday society, in the news, you know, in magazines and the media. Um, it's kind of...not kind of, it is the dominant culture. It's kind of like, the "standard" and everything else is a deviation... I feel like it's...it's just something that people accept at a young age without questioning it. (Summer)

Traditional gender roles. Participants echoed past literature stating how heterosexual culture and heterosexual identity are "subordinate and concomitant to the processes involving gender identity development in Western cultural contexts" (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002, p. 504). Processes of gender identity and gender expression were rigid and tightly connected to traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity that put heterosexual cisgender men at the top of the social hierarchy, subordinating those who are of "lower social stature" (Richmond, Levant, & Ladhani, 2012). Oliver II stated, "the gender roles, the sexuality roles are so strict and specific that either you're not going to fit them or you're going to end up hurting yourself or other people a lot by trying to fit them." Moana expressed frustration, stating, "Gender norms up the ass! And like really weird in particular social norms," which reflects the pervasiveness of rigid and, at times, toxic heterosexist ideas of gender.

Participants also noted the presence of the gender binary as well as traditional roles prescribed by heterosexism and patriarchy that were omnipresent in heterosexual culture. Jenny noted, "the woman stays at home, cleans, does childcare etcetera, the man goes and wins bread." Other participants echoed similar explanations and views on these traditional gender roles within the culture.

I think it's this idea of strict roles. So there's strict gender roles, there's strict

familial roles... it's this rigid gender structure and there's also um, an assumption that everyone comes out the same. So everyone comes out...if you're a boy when you come out, you are a cisgender, you are a heterosexual, and you will like boy things like baseball and sports and power tools. And if you are a girl when you come out, you are cisgender, you are heterosexual and you will like cooking and you will like sewing and dolls and things like that. So there's just like this overwhelming gender construct that you're expected to fulfill. (Kendra)

I think that there's a lot of ideals around, um, masculinity and femininity. Right? There's a lot of assumptions that masculinity and femininity are inherent, that they are opposite and uh, complementary... there's this assumption that man and woman are counterparts that are meant to be together and that comes up a lot of different ways in straight culture. (Pega)

Participants expressed viewpoints consistent with a queer theory and intersectional framework, expressing how heterosexual culture is rooted in a patriarchal society. Patriarchy and heterosexist create systems of oppression and inequality that directly oppress those who are not White, cisgender, heterosexual men.

Culture of privilege and oppression. Sexual minorities expressed how the heterosexual culture was more individualistic rather than collective and centered around White, upper-middle class, cisgender men. Lexi shared, "it's represented everywhere... so they don't have to really seek out so much information or community."

like, just kind of like every man for themselves. I don't feel like it's very, like, "I'm a straight cis-gendered white male, but I'm going to fight for, you know, these other minorities or these other, like, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, like low income, socioeconomic minorities"... it's like "Oh! It's not my problem. I'm not going to worry about it because it doesn't affect me." Like, that's the kind of image I feel like is ideal, so to speak. Just like, take care of your...you and your own and let everybody else fend for themselves. (Summer)

As a result of heterosexual culture being more individualistic and centered around the majority population, many participants highlighted the heterosexual culture being a culture of privilege. Lexi expressed this frustration saying, "Ummmm, so maybe their life

is just easier in sense. 'cause they are just told to like... what they are supposed to do.”

Participants believed heterosexual culture to be highly privileged and unaware of oppression and it's impacts on minority groups-- especially LGBTQ+ people.

It's a culture of privilege, I think. Um, it's a culture that, that does not ever need to define itself as a culture. Ya know? I mean, that if a man meets a girl he likes and asks her out it's like, like it's not like hetero culture is like, it's what gay people aim to achieve in life. I don't think they have like a culture, I think it's just, they are just living life. (Amadi)

And with that heterosexual identity, you do end up with a “status” so to speak in society... it's an unfortunate fact that they have a platform and they can speak from a place of privilege. (Kendra)

It's all these stereotypes (*laughs*) that's all it really is, but like... at least like hetero (*laughs*) hetero culture, ummmm.... (*sighs*)... I don't want to say like “people are living in ignorance” because then people can't like experience what like they don't know. Like, you can't be ignorant of something you don't know anything about. So, kinda like misinformation and... uh... just not knowing. Like... as someone, like.... (*sighs*) (*laughs*).... When you are outside of a community of oppression like if you're white and not black... you are never going to understand exactly what black people are going through, like... and as someone who is heterosexual... you never are really going to understand what someone who is queer is going through. You can only really help. But like... it's so easy to not do that. Like... it's so easy to just sit in your lane and stay in your lane... and not think about what's going on around you. And I think that's really hetero culture. It's just not... really taking time to notice what's happening around you. (Oliver I)

Privilege is defined as the enjoyment of special advantages, rights, and immunities beyond that of other groups (Rothenberg, 2016). Heterosexual assumptions often grant heterosexuals with special entitlements that LGBTQ+ individuals are unable to access, resulting in unearned power and advantage over sexual minorities. Social and cultural norms that are based in heterosexism and homophobia exacerbate inequality and invisibility of sexual minorities (Worthington et al., 2002).

Pervasiveness of heterodominant culture. Sexual minorities were often unsure

of how to describe heterosexual culture due to the prevalence of heterosexuality in everyday life. Oliver II shared, “the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about like, heterosexual...heteronormative culture, is the like, almost omnipresence of it, like that it’s just everywhere.” Walter echoed this idea of heterosexual being seen as the norm in society, “I mean, if it isn’t a minority... then it probably is heterosexual.” Other participants expressed similar ideas about the heterosexual culture being dominant depiction of sexuality in everyday life.

Walter: You go to the movies—heterosexual relationships all around. You pick up a book—heterosexual relationships all around. You go to the grocery store—there are heterosexual relationships everywhere. (Squid)

J: What is the heterosexual culture?

Walter: (*laughs*) what is the heterosexual culture...It’s literally *everything*. Right? So, (*sighs*) god, heterosexuals. (*laughs*)... Soooo... I don’t... that’s really hard to describe because when you grow up in a place like, literally this entire country.... not even necessarily my hometown... where everything revolves or is influenced by heterosexuality, then it’s hard to describe what isn’t heterosexual culture.

Several participants questioned if heterosexual culture could formally be considered and defined as a culture due to its pervasiveness and because heterosexuality was seen as dominant and privileged. Walter expressed, “They don’t need to have ideals. disadvantages.” Oliver I shared, “Heterosexuality there... really isn’t [a culture] because that’s how it’s been. That’s just how it is, and that’s what you hear.” Several other participants continued to question the legitimacy of conceptualizing heterosexual culture.

It’s hard to define heterosexual culture, up like...because it’s so prevalent, like we...we’re so in it all of the time that it’s hard to like, describe it as a separate thing... It’s very constraining to me. (Alex)

They have these ideas about a family structure. They have these ideas of what

your rights as an American are, and those rights include guns and low taxes and not being threatened by people who don't believe in the same things as you, like religion or whatever else. I don't know. Uh, I don't know, it just...it's everything. It just feels like it's everything. It's heterosexual culture. It's just so pervasive and everywhere. (Kendra)

Ummm, can we say there's heterosexual culture.... I mean, I would like to say no. Right? Because, why should there be one? But... (pause)... I don't know... It's probably because we are *really* tired of heterosexuals... like... Because we live in a society where everything revolves around them. (Walter)

These sexual minorities found it difficult to allow heterosexual culture to exist due to its privileged status and omnipresence in society. Moreover, heterosexuality does not have anything to lose or anything to celebrate a sense of collective or cultural identity. Oliver I expressed the link between the existence of a culture and celebration of one's culture.

In order for it to be a culture there needs to be a label that they feel like needs to be celebrated in a way or like needs to.... like... being heterosexual is a source of pride. And so much of culture is something you feel like is something that's celebrated. But there's no reason to necessarily be like need to boost yourself up about being heterosexual. It's something that is very accepted and very seen as normal. So, like... it's hard to say there's a culture surrounding it... to me at least. Because there's no reason for there to be. If that makes sense. (Oliver I)

Contextual Navigation

One of the central components of the present study was to explore the phenomena of LGBTQ+ culture and the potential parallels of acculturation processes and bicultural adaptation among sexual minorities. However, considering the terms of acculturation and bicultural adaptation have a strong connection with the experiences of ethnic minority and immigrants (Berry, 1992), using these terms when describing the experiences of sexual minorities has a strong potential for promoting cultural appropriation. Concepts

must be created in order to avoid the appropriation of terms, acknowledge and respect the experiences of ethnic minorities and immigrants, while simultaneously acknowledging the parallels that are drawn with regard to the unique experiences of sexual minorities navigating within a heterodominant society. Thus, the concept of *contextual navigation* was created to best describe the novel experiences of sexual minorities' interactions within LGBTQ+ and heterodominant culture.

Contextual navigation is the on-going adaptive process of negotiating visibility of one's sexual identity within sociocultural contexts. Sexual minorities examine and evaluate contexts or environments to determine if their sexual identity is safe, affirmed, or in danger of discrimination and potential marginalization. Contextual navigating consists of: (a) internal processes, such as awareness of their sociocultural context in relation to their sexual identity, and (b) behaviors used to navigate a given sociocultural context while maintaining one's sexual identity (i.e., concealing and disclosing sexual identity). Contextual navigation highlights the ongoing process of concealing and disclosing sexual identity depending on the information provided within a particular sociocultural context. The process stresses an individual's use of knowledge and rules of a particular community or social context in order to adapt, navigate, and connect within a given context. Creating this term accurately captures the unique experiences of the LGBTQ+ community and how they navigate within a heterodominant society while maintaining their cultural status with the LGBTQ+ culture.

Internal Processes

Awareness of social context. Participants described the decision process of

concealing or disclosing their sexual identity within broader sociocultural contexts.

Oliver II reflected on this process and said, “Am I going to tell them or am I not going to tell them?” Sexual minorities have a unique experience of being able to disclose or conceal their identity within social contexts or interpersonal interactions (Pachankis, 2007). Sexual minorities expressed how they evaluate social situations and make internal calculations of whether not certain spaces are affirming or potentially dangerous.

Risk and safety. Sexual minorities within the study described a process of awareness, monitoring, and, at times, hypervigilance of safety within their social contexts, consistent with previous research (Dozier, 2015; Pachankis, 2007). Squid shared, “I think I just kind of, my default position is “it is not safe” and if I’m coming out it will always be a risk.” Other participants described similar processes of being hyper-vigilant and observant of their environment in relation to the safety of their sexual identity.

visibility in terms of being out is always something that is shaped by personal evaluations of risk, and I can’t...because...because so many people recognize that, there’s this idea that it’s okay to not be out. (Jenny)

when somebody walks into a room, regardless of the setting whether it is um, a religious space or the grocery store or their parents’ house, how do they know whether it’s safe? Um, and I think the short answer is they don’t. Um, and I think that generally speaking, I know...and this is definitely speaking from my personal experience and from the experience of only a handful of other people. But I feel like generally people...LGBT individuals walk around not knowing if they’re safe not. Um, they don’t...and the default is to...to assume you’re not safe, because that’s just how you protect yourself. (Squid)

I think reasons for not disclosing would be you know, um, not feeling quite safe or not having like all the elements of the situation worked out around me. (Seattle)

Alex walked through the complex process sexual minorities experience when

evaluating the sociocultural context they are in before making a decision to disclose their sexual identity.

J: How do you navigate between these two cultures?

Alex: Carefully. *[laughs]*

J: Carefully?

Alex: Yeah, um, I think it's like a certain degree of being aware of where you're at and who you're around and what the reason for being there is. Like it's all very contextual to me, like, um, you know I...I think there's a degree of whenever you enter a situation, assessing like, okay what...what is the dominant like...attitude here, culture here, and how can I kind of like integrate within that and function within that without sacrificing like too much of myself, kind of thing. Um, and then yeah kind of just like modulating like, how that is, depending on the situation. So like, um, I guess an example would be like, last year I was working at a state hospital in rural Indiana and um, you know like when...on the days where I worked there I would dress a lot more, like, gender conforming and that kind of thing, just to make things simpler. And that's okay because I, you know, I feel very comfortable navigating between those two kind of...well between the binary I guess. Um, so like on those days I'd present a lot more conforming whereas when I'm, you know, at work within my department which is a lot more accepting, you know, I'm like, "Okay!" Like, "I'll wear a button down and a tie today," and that's like fine, you know, and that's comfortable. Um, so it's really just assessing like, what is the culture of the situation that you're in and then sort of modulating how you're presenting and how you're acting to a degree depending on that.

Sexual minorities display a great deal of resilience as they assess their safety when navigating different social contexts (Asakura, 2016). Sexual minorities have to seek out safe spaces in order to secure themselves from "outing" themselves and potentially facing stigma or oppression. Moana shared her experience of seeking out a safe space just for the purpose of attending the interview for the current study.

Being in the closet. Um, as someone who *is* in the closet—or at least partially in the closet, I would say the pain of having to hide yourself in order to pass within, um, amongst your peers. Also the pain of not knowing who you can and cannot tell.

Um, for this int—I mean like for this interview specifically, like, I had to really think about where I could be without outing myself to other people. Um, so I would definitely say something that is normative is to hide who we are in order to pass. (Moana)

Moana's experience illustrates the lengths sexual minorities go to ensure that their sexual identities and well-being are secure.

Internal calculations. Participants described their experiences of making internal calculations depending on their specific context. Relationships, political climate, whether they were in a LGBTQ+ space, or social interactions were taken into account when determining to disclose or conceal their sexual identity. Kendra shared, “it depends on who I am talking to.” Other participants shared their experiences and the many factors that went into their decision.

So, these calculations will have to be made depending on where I am and the circumstances of the situation.... at the point in time where my sexual identity would jump in front is determined by who is in the room and where, you know, where the location is. (Amadi)

My expression of my other identities is always, um, always something I calculate based on the amount space that I would be taking up by claiming that identity. (Jenny)

I usually just kind of make like, a little assessment of do I know this person well enough to know that like... they'll be cool about it? Do I think that I'm close enough to this person that they deserve to know about it? And if I'm deciding like, yeah I want this person to know about my identities, I'll just be like, “Yeah, I'm queer,” and leave it at that, and if they want to know more I'll talk about it. (Oliver II)

Research has found decisions to disclose sexual identity may be influenced by context and social interactions (Sabat, Trump, & King, 2014). Moreover, concealing sexual identity is a choice that individuals make and may be general or situation specific (King, Mohr, Peddie, Jones, & Kendra, 2014). Due to the pervasiveness of the

heterodominant culture, participants described how they often defaulted to navigating within the heterosexual culture as opposed to navigating *between* the heterodominant and LGBTQ+ culture. Sexual minorities explained the complex process of navigating within the heterosexual culture, remaining mindful while navigating between the two cultures.

like existing in public almost feels like... you have to default to an existence of... like navigating *within* uhhh heterosexual culture because... that's unfortunately seen as the default. But like you can't tell who around you is going to judge you for being queer. And I think that's the main the difference between trying to navigate between cultures is existing in public. (Oliver I)

Like you have to be an expert and know when to move it to the back-burner, when to leave it, like... most times when you are dealing in the regular world or the straight world you have to move it to the back-burner all the time. You have to wear this mentality of "look, here right now, we are having a straight conversation." (Amadi)

Contexts to conceal. Participants briefly described contexts where they knew they would have to conceal their identity or make it less salient. This was primarily due to contexts where their other intersecting identities were more salient within a given context while their sexual identity was in danger of being stigmatized. Summer expressed that her sexual identity would be less salient when, "I'm heavily immersed in the Armenian activist community." Seattle also shared, "when I interviewed for law school... I was actively asked to describe myself... and I know I actively did not include my sexual identity." Other participants shared their experiences of having to conceal their sexual identity within specific social contexts.

Whenever I go back to Mexico to visit my, my mom and my family and just friends... that usually is a time when I'm like, "okay my gay identity... gonna have to wait a little bit" just because, I mean, I'm not in a space where I'm safe ummm, to share that identity or to express as much, ummm... I think with, with some... with some of my friends in Mexico, I can and it's fine and I think a lot of them are fascinated because... that's just (*sighs*) within all of my friends in Mexico, being

gay and not seeming flamboyant is like *fascinating* to them, it's crazy and so... that's a whole 'nother thing in itself. Umm, and so when I go to Mexico it's usually like, for the most part act like, put this identity aside. (Oscar)

It's cool to like, as a community, embrace identity, but I don't think it's something that you need to broadcast. So like, going between spaces is just kind of... it's something that I... something I do passively. I don't... it doesn't really feel like I am actively going between. Unless I'm like going home for Thanksgiving and that is like the most like... I am actively putting myself in like a heterosexual space right now. (Oliver II)

Sexual minorities are highly aware and vigilant of contexts where they may be discriminated against, which may influence LGBTQ+ people to conceal their identity to avoid discrimination (Walch, Ngamake, Bovornusvakool, & Walker, 2016). For example, Lasser and Tharinger (2003) found that LGBTQ+ youth concealed their sexual identity in order to avoid bullying and stigma within their school setting.

Contexts to disclose. Participants described processes of disclosing their sexual identity in order to address stigma or experiences of oppression. Findings on revealing sexual identity were discussed in the first section of the results (see section on Centrality and Salience of Sexual Identity). Lexi and Amadi shared their views on disclosing their sexual identity when addressing stigma.

J: When you're ever like challenged or threatened in that sense, like, with like oppression, do you find your identity, um, more central to who you are in those moments?

Lexi: Yeah, I would say. Um, like if I hear something...someone saying something about the LGBT community I might then feel internally like I need to represent the community.

Lexi: Um, yeah in those instances it would jump to the front and be like, I need to say something. Um.

Amadi: Yeah, that's a...it's actually very interesting to hear that. Um, because for me, I would have to make some calculations in my head before to

determine if it would jump to the front or if I would just let it slide.

While some individuals feel secure in disclosing their identity when addressing stigma or discrimination, not all sexual minorities may feel safe in this process.

Disclosure within specific contexts can potentially increase the risk of discrimination and negative psychological outcomes (Riggle, Rostosky, Black, & Rosenkrantz, 2017).

Continuous process of coming out. Sexual minorities expressed the continuous, and at times exhausting, process of coming out. Oscar shared, “you’re constantly having to out yourself, you’re constantly having to, ya know, self-disclose.” Jenny echoed this and shared, “you don’t just come out once, coming out is always a risk... You’re continually coming out to every person you meet... coming out is always a contingent process.” Oscar and Jenny’s viewpoints on coming out are consistent with previous research of coming out being a life-long process (Meyer, 2003). Concealing and disclosing sexual identity is an internal process that is highly contingent on external factors that sexual minorities have to monitor within their specific context (Dozier, 2015; King et al., 2014; Meyer, 2003; Sabat et al., 2014). Sexual minorities weigh the consequences between “fear of discrimination on one hand and a need for self-integrity on the other” (Meyer, 2003, p. 682).

Affect during concealment and disclosure process. Participants not only shared the internal process and decision-making behind concealing or disclosing their identity, but also expressed the emotional toll it took on their psychological and emotional well-being. Oscar shared, “I’m doing it not because I wanted to please these people around me, but it’s more of I’m trying to protect my emotional and psychological well-being at

this moment.”

Some participants, such as Oliver II, expressed anger and frustration when having to conceal their sexual identity. Oliver II shared, “If it’s when I’m in a space where I feel like I have to put it on the back burner so that I can feel like, safe or comfortable, I’m mostly like angry or frustrated that I have to do that to feel comfortable.” Other participants, however, expressed feelings of guilt and shame.

Guilt. Definitely guilt. Right? I mean, the ability to put it on the backburner is something I’m conscious of. The fact that I’m gender conforming, the fact that I’m fairly feminine, like, there’s not a lot about me that codes me in the larger straight culture as queer. (Pega)

I do feel like I get to experience both cultures and in that way, I kind of feel like it’s not fair to those that can’t. And um, it’s kind of like survivor’s guilt, if you...if you can draw that analogy. (Summer)

Seattle: Gross is the word that’s coming to mind...

Amadi: I would say betrayal... sort of like... yeah. Like self-deceit or something.

Seattle: Self-deceit, I agree with that, yeah.

Amadi shared an experience where he witnessed a sexual minority man being kicked out of a bar due to their sexual orientation. During this altercation, Amadi expressed that he did not stand-up for the man and stayed silent. Amadi shared the emotions he experienced after the event occurred.

J: During moments when you chose to not speak out, I guess, how did you feel about that? How did you feel about those situations like afterward?

Amadi: When I couldn’t speak out?

J: Yeah, like moments when you couldn’t speak out, or where you were like, “I am not going to.”

Amadi: I felt terrible! I felt really terrible, I was like “Damn.” Ya know? Like,

what if that was me? What if that was, like, somebody, like I felt really terrible... Before I started to speak out... when that would happen, I would go back and think. And I would really feel bad about it. Like I'll really bad, like I should have said something, I should have said something, I should have said something.

Higher levels of anxiety and depression are associated with disclosing and concealing sexual identity (Juster, Smith, Ouellet, Sindi, & Lupien, 2013; Kosciw, Greytak, Barkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). This is partially attributed to the hypervigilance of concealing a stigmatized identity, the fear of discrimination, and experiences of rejection after coming out (Pachankis, 2007; Pachankis, Cochran, & Mays, 2015). Kendra shared, "I'm content for them to see me as heterosexual, because I am afraid that I would be discriminated against otherwise." Walter also shared his feelings of anxiety, "If I accidentally tipped somebody off about my sexual identity... it can be kind of... it can give me some anxiety." Many participants expressed feelings of anxiety and fear when deciding to conceal or disclose their sexual identity.

Discomfort, it's some concern or mild anxiety about what this person would think of me were I to disclose that information. how it might change a professional relationship... how it might change how my... my extended family would see me. You know, never fear that I would come into any harm, but concern that I might be seen in a different light. Um, perhaps very mild concern for discrimination. (Seattle)

I think when I, when I do decide to come out... I think it's always some level of anxiety and some level of nervousness... But I think, ya know, you're like, since you're.... it's always, always coming out to people ummmm your entire life. So there's, there's still some level of nervous ness and anxiety, 'cause ya just never know like how people react. (Oscar)

Squid previously shared an experience of disclosing his sexual identity and addressing his fellow classmates at a highly conservative and religious institution regarding their homophobic remarks. Squid shared the aftermath and how the stress and

anxiety of disclosing his identity impacted his mental and physical health.

it was a risk, and looking back on the experience I don't know if it's a risk I would take again... that took a huge toll on my physical health after that. I was sick for another week. Ummmm, and I was very aware of kind of that link between ya know stigma and physical health, ummm in that moment. (Squid)

The minority stress model describes how sexual minorities are at risk for additive stress due to experiences of discrimination, homophobic remarks, concealing, and disclosing their sexual identity (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Importance is stressed on how the process of contextual navigation (i.e., concealing and disclosing identity) within highly stressful and unaffirming contexts may affect the mental health of sexual minorities. Further research should examine the phenomenon of contextual navigation through qualitative methodology.

Previous research has highlighted the importance sexual minorities place on being authentic about their sexual identity and how this was beneficial in developing a positive sense of self (Riggle et al., 2008; Rostosky et al., 2010). Several participants shared how hiding their sexual identity, which at times was a central aspect of their self-concept, made them feel unauthentic. Kendra shared her emotions when choosing to conceal her sexual identity saying, "I don't feel happy. And I don't feel authentic." Other participants expressed their frustrations as well.

at the moment, I do...I am dating a guy so, you know, I bring him around, and we hang out with my parents and like they...they have no idea, you know, but. So it is something that I could kind of use to my advantage. Um, and in a way it's like, I feel like I'm being ingenuine, or not a hundred percent real. But in another way, I'm just counting my lucky stars that I can use it to my advantage when it coincidentally happens to be the case that, you know, right now I'm dating a guy. (Summer)

Um, I felt a little bit uncomfortable with the fact that it was, um, with...with the

fact that I couldn't be authentic, but at least I was safe. (Squid)

I don't feel as engaged, I don't feel as "myself." So it is...I feel like it a very important part of my identity that I sometimes can't acknowledge. And when I can't acknowledge that, it feels like I'm not being genuine and I'm not presenting who I really am. (Kendra)

I feel kinda frustrated and I feel like I, I have to put this persona of me. Ummm, because I feel like it's not being me completely or genuinely... just the fact that the people I'm with don't know me for me like completely.... and I feel like I have to actively hide a part of me... I think that just that thought leads to frustration and helplessness. (Oscar)

Authenticity about their sexual identity is important for sexual minorities. Riggle and Rostosky (2012) found that feelings of authenticity were an important part of positive sexual identity development and well-being. While disclosure potentially increases the risk of stigma and discrimination, concealment appears to be strongly connected to lower levels of authenticity (Riggle et al., 2017) making the "dialectic of coming out" a difficult process to manage (Dindia, 1998).

Sexual minorities also shared experiences of relief after disclosing their sexual identity. Seattle shared, "when I disclose, um, my sexual identity, it's... it's a feeling of relief." Oscar described his experience of coming out to people and shared, "I think there's still excitement and... I think there's still some level of like satisfaction and happiness to be able to finally say that out loud." Lexi also shared, "I guess like when I reveal it to someone it's usually like a relieving feeling. Because I feel like I'm not hiding that part of myself and I'm being honest with them." However, not all sexual minorities only experience feelings of relief when disclosing their sexual identity. Squid shared his experience.

I don't know if I would categorize what I feel as relief. Like maybe there's a little

bit of relief, and then there's also, ya know, sheer terror 'cause I have no idea how people are going to respond... And I guess maybe there's part of me that doesn't want to feel relief. I don't know... I don't want to get too comfortable with.... I'm, I'm afraid of getting too comfortable with coming out I guess. (Squid)

Squid's experience demonstrates the need to explore context in the process of concealment and disclosure processes. Squid's experiences of disclosing his sexual identity have mainly been within the context of his highly conservative and religious community, and it makes sense that his feelings of relief quickly turned to anxiety and feelings of uncertainty. By emphasizing the importance of sociocultural context in the disclosure and concealment process (i.e., contextual navigation), researchers can obtain a more holistic view of the unique experiences sexual minorities face in a given setting or environment.

Navigation Behaviors

Having a “foot in both.” Participants were asked about their identification with the LGBTQ+ and heterosexual culture and their process of navigating within these cultures. Participants mainly expressed how they identified or experienced both cultures. Jenny stated, “I share both of those cultures.” Other participants expressed their experiences of identifying with both cultures.

You know, I...one of the ways that I look at bisexuality is kind of having a foot in both...both areas and...and so I have an idea, but at the same time it also feels very foreign. It feels...in a lot of ways it feels very safe. It must be nice being safe all the time. (Squid)

we need to be masters of both, even though we're not a part of the big culture, we have to learn how it operates, how it thinks, and find our space within that. Um, you know, we cannot be exclusive. We need to learn how to operate with the big world. (Amadi)

J: ...do you feel you can identify with one or the other? Or do you feel like you identify a little bit with both?

Alex: I mean I think a little bit with both, um, I think in terms of like my values and interests and kind of the way I relate to others, I like to think that's more within like, the framework of the LGBT culture, but like I live in a, like a heterosexual society, right? So, I also have a degree of that heterosexual culture that I feel like, rings true for me, like, I...you know, follow a lot of those norms in a way. And there's some...you know, there are also a lot I don't.

Squid mentioned his experience navigating between the heterosexual and LGBTQ+ culture saying how he could navigate the cultures with ease. Squid shared how this was partially attributed to his ability to pass as a member of the dominant culture, but also due to his relationship with his wife.

I think that the short answer would be that it's pretty seamless in a lot of ways. At first, I don't think it was, because I was still learning to accept the non-heterosexual part of myself and be okay with the fact that I was also attracted to men. But once I figured that out, once I started to get to a place where, yes, my attraction to a m...to men is okay with me, it became very easy for me to...it...it's very easy for me to jump back and forth. (Squid)

Some participants explained that they partially identified with the heterosexual culture because it was the culture in which they were raised. LGBTQ+ individuals grow up within a heteronormative society and, therefore, are raised with “default heterosexual identities” (Rust, 1996, p. 87). Kendra shared, “how I identify with the heterosexual culture? I mean, that's where I was raised.” Seattle also shared, “I mean certainly the heterodominant culture is the one that I was raised in, so um, you know, I'm very familiar with what that looks like and um, the uh, ideals or standards that come with that.” Other participants shared similar feelings of identification with the heterosexual culture due to being exposed and raised in that context before coming out and experiencing LGBTQ+

culture.

I came from a heterosexual culture. I was raised in it, so I have that experience of pretending to be a heterosexual for more years of life than I've been like alive... whenever I would go to those spaces where I need to conceal it... I can do it, and I think that's how I have that foot in that heterosexual culture. Ummm... but ya know, I'm still a part of the other LGBTQ culture. (Oscar)

The process sexual minorities undergo somewhat parallels that of enculturation that ethnic minorities experience (Berry, 1992). In essence, the process of acquiring one's culture is reversed for sexual minorities as compared to ethnic minorities. Sexual minorities first are born within the dominant culture and then undergo a similar process of enculturation, or learning one's culture as a sexual minority, through immersing themselves into the LGBTQ+ culture, exposure to LGBTQ+ history, and engaging with other in-group members. Sexual minorities seek to cultivate the ability to "code-switch" by obtaining information and learning how to navigate safely across different sociocultural contexts (Asakura, 2016).

Participants who described themselves as "straight-passing" (i.e., a slang term used to describe sexual minorities who do not fit typical stereotypes of being LGBTQ+, including appearance, mannerisms, and interests; Carpenter, 2008) shared how they experienced difficulties connecting and integrating into the LGBTQ+ culture due to their ability to easily be seen as a member of the dominant heterosexual culture. Lexi described that, "being [a] feminine presenting lesbian and how that has... you have to kinda work harder to fit into the LGBTQ culture and just like... make it known that you are part of it." Seattle also shared, "I do feel like I'm more outwardly straight-passing and... I think sometimes I don't quite fit in, because of those outward behaviors, in the

LGBTQ community.” Other participants shared similar experiences.

being bisexual in a heterosexual relationship, I am definitely taking advantage of bisexual indiv...invisibility. Um, it’s, um...which is both a blessing and a curse, I would say. Um, it...it’s a blessing in that I’m shielded from a lot of the, um, discrimination and microaggressions that LGBT people experience every day, but it also makes it hard for me to integrate with the community, um, *because* I don’t have those experiences. It’s nice to not have them, but it also makes it difficult to relate to people in the community. (Squid)

Yeah! I, I don’t think like I assimilated to like heteronormative culture. I think it was very much... I... for me I easily pass straight growing up... I think for the most part, I think I, I passed as straight and I think a lot of times I still do pass as straight. Ummmm... and so I feel like there was no struggle assimilating to heterodominant, I think was more of like, “How do I break from it and try to integrate into LGBT culture?” (Oscar)

Heteronormative scripts and straight-passing. Participants described different behaviors of concealing their sexual identity within unsafe contexts within the heterodominant culture. One of the main strategies used by the participants was taking advantage of the heteronormative scripts in order to appear “straight-passing.” Oscar shared, “you are assumed heterosexual unless proved otherwise.” Seattle also shared, “I do look relatively straight. Or sometimes act as such. And I think sometimes I do that to, I don’t know, make sure that I... I fit in with the heterodominant culture.” Moana described the process of “code-switching” (Asakura, 2016) in order to use the heterosexual scripts to her advantage in order to conceal her identity and pass.

I will say that um, in heterosexual situations, you bet your ass I’m saying everything in the book that I have been taught [*snaps*] is normal [*snaps*] conver- [*snaps*]-sation [*snaps*]. So for example, there...I just was talking to a coworker and she was talking about her boyfriend and she was like, “Yeah, like, I’m so excited.” Like, “We’re gonna do this and this and this,” and talking about going on dates and um, talking about some heterosexual bullshit and I was just like, “Cool.” And then she like turned to me and was like, “So like, what do you and *your* boyfriend do?” And I was just like, “I don’t have a boyfriend,” like, “I’m

just looking.” Like, “Oh you know I’m looking to get married by the time I’m twenty-three,” like, knowing damn well that A: like, I don’t fuck with men, B: I’m not trying to get married. Like, I...it’s definitely, when I’m having conversations with heterosexual people, I just know the script and I use it. Because I’m just like...this is...I was raised nineteen years of this bullshit, I know how to code. Like, I know how to code switch, I guess is the word I’m looking for here. (Moana)

Moana demonstrated how sexual minorities may conceal their identity when feeling unsafe within a given context. When sexual minorities feel unsafe, some may actively conceal their sexual identity or present a “straight” identity in order to pass and avoid stigma (Pachankis, 2007; Riggle et al., 2017). Participants provided definitions of the phenomenon of “straight-passing.”

if we are both culturally competent in the heterodominant culture and the LGBTQ culture, then passing privilege is something like exploiting our understanding of the heterodominant culture to, you know, make sure that others perceive us as not different. I guess in one way it’s... it’s exploiting the cultural competency that I might have, um, to blend in I guess. (Seattle)

It’s a privilege in the sense that if I’m in spaces where... there might be more homophobia or less acceptance of LGBTQ individuals.... typically I’m not targetted as such, right off the bat, or people don’t typically suspect that I’m part of the LGBTQ community... and so I do feel that sort of safety net at first that I can decide if I’m going to come out or not.... (Oscar)

So passing privilege is this idea that you can walk out of your house and nobody will know that you’re LGBT. No one will assume that from your behavior, your demeanor, your clothing, your hairstyle. (Kendra)

The phenomenon of straight-passing has been critiqued by the LGBTQ+ community and by queer theorists (Carpenter, 2008; Sedgwick, 1990; Sullivan, 2003; Warner, 2000). First, straight-passing has been seen by some sexual minorities as a denial of gay pride and feigning normalcy (i.e., heterosexuality), thereby promoting the idea of compulsory heterosexuality (Clarke & Smith, 2015). Second, straight-passing can be

thought of as a way to appear “acceptable” to the heterodominant culture, which implies flaws or abnormalities with being a sexual minority and normalcy with being heterosexual (Carpenter, 2008). While this does not promote the queer theory goals of defying and eliminating the concept of “normal,” the phenomenon of straight-passing, for some, is a concealment behavior that keeps sexual minorities safe from stigma. Future research should examine the psychological outcomes of those who have and do not have “passing-privilege.”

Sexual minorities described this as a privilege that not all sexual minorities benefit from, and those who do benefit from passing privilege do not typically conform to stereotypes that the dominant culture has of LGBTQ+ people. Kendra shared, “there’s a rush of telegraphs that society uses to try to pick out who they think is gay.” Moana sarcastically expressed how she does not necessarily pay attention to conforming to stereotypes of appearing “straight,” stating, “well, I don’t try too hard, obviously. [*laughs as points to close-shaved, neon-blue hairstyle*].” Concealing sexual identity may be passive process (i.e., playing into heteronormative assumptions) or a more active process (i.e., changing gender pronouns, mannerisms, behaviors; Riggle et al., 2017). Oscar shared, “when I was in middle school and stuff I would conceal it in a sense that... ummm, I think I... forced myself to always be a little more masculine.” Other participants shared how they paid close attention to how they presented themselves (i.e., mannerisms, dress, gender expression).

maintaining good posture and not be expressive either facially or...or with my hands. Um, uh, you know certainly refraining from any physical contact, uh, aside from a handshake perhaps, but. Um, I think I...I find myself playing more of the, you know, standard reserved role with my like, body expression and also with

my...perhaps with my emotive expression. (Seattle)

I guess like the way I dress is a big one, um, so if I'm in a space that is very, like, heteronormative, um, you know I'm probably gonna dress more in like feminine clothing. Um, uh, I guess like if I'm interacting with people that like I don't really know, um, probably like, change my voice a little bit so when I'm kind of like just in a more comfortable space I tend to like, lower my voice a little bit, make it a little bit more masculine. Whereas when I'm trying to navigate within a really heteronormative space where most people are gonna see me as female, I, you know, let my voice go back up, change the way I dress. Um, I guess like if I'm with my partner and I'm in a really hetero...like, heteronormative space, then, you know, we'll...we'll kind of like navigate like, "Do we hold hands here? Do we not?" (Alex)

While some participants paid close attention to their mannerisms as a way to feign normalcy and conceal their identity, some sexual minorities refrained from speaking about certain topics or omitted information. Seattle shared, "I think my strategy for concealment is often just redirecting conversation or... or sometimes even evading the question if it's direct." Oliver II also described how they omit information in order to pass, "I feel... it's probably more of an omission thing, like... I do avoid topics if I can see I would start to be too like, if it would be a little too uncomfortable to get into." Other participants shared similar experiences.

Ummm, let's see. Things that I do to please the heterosexuals... I think I tend to use more gender-neutral terms or... and I don't really bring up personal stuff as much. (Walter)

I feel like the most I go through to conceal my behavior is to lie by omission by not providing information or not giving an opinion that would identify me as part of the group... If you draw conclusions from my incomplete picture that I am heterosexual well, I never said I was. But you've drawn that conclusion and we... and you know, I've concealed myself, but I haven't lied. (Kendra)

Finally, bisexual-identified participants described how they had the unique ability to play into bi-invisibility by making reference to their heterosexual partner as a way to

pass as straight (Bradford, 2004). Pega shared, “for me it’s pretty easy [to pass] because I have a male... male-identified partner. So just saying ‘boyfriend’ works really well.”

Other participants shared similar experiences.

as a fallback, I mean, saying that I have a male partner is...it’s like an instant, “Oh, okay. She’s heterosexual then.” For, cuz you know...I...I think that bisexual people are very often overlooked and um, so therefore if I just mention that I have a boyfriend, I’ve automatically just been labeled as heterosexual. (Kendra)

J: How do you navigate or adapt within the heterodominant culture?

Squid: Marrying a woman helped.

Oscar: (*laughs*)

J: How do you pass?

Summer: Yeah. Well, um, I never do it as a like, intentional strategy to kind of evade a certain situation. But, it just happens naturally as I’m living my life. Like, um, how I mentioned how right now I’m dating a guy, so just by me going out with him and being out with him, people look at me and see a heterosexual couple.

Disclosure methods. Participants also described the strategies and methods used to “come out” or disclose their sexual identity. Kendra spoke to the unique nature of some sexual minorities of having a “concealable identity.” For sexual minorities, some individuals may pass as a member of the dominant culture even though they identify as LGBTQ+, thereby making their disclosure of sexual identity pertinent to their visibility within social interactions. Kendra shared her experience.

disclosing my identity, is letting them know up front that...you know, because things like racism, you can’t hide if you are a particular race, and so people can identify you at face value and say, “Oh, I shouldn’t be racist because this is a racial group...person that is in a racial group.” But with um, you know, LGBT it’s not readily apparent in a lot of t...in a lot um, instances and, you know, when you meet someone you don’t say, “Oh, hi! My name’s Kendra, I’m...I’m bisexual.”

Or, “hey my name is Charles and I’m gay.” You know, it’s not...it’s not something that we typically put out there at the beginning. (Kendra)

Some participants shared how they disclosed their identity or sent messages to fellow in-group members. Disclosing to other sexual minorities in potentially unsafe contexts allowed for a sense of connection and support to fellow sexual minorities.

I love giving the gay look to one another. Um, we were...I was sitting at a conference once with another gay girl, and um, one of our professors she’s also gay and she said something along the lines of, “I don’t want to, you know, push the gay agenda on my heterosexual students.” And me and that gay girl both looked at each other, we’re like, like [fans fingers out], “*Gay* agenda.” It was like, a really beautiful moment! And I just felt so connected to another individual! Or, um, in that same meeting there was a heterosexual girl who, she was like, “Um, I really enjoyed it when *you* people,” and she talking to that gay girl that I had just looked at, and the gay girl looked at me, and I looked at her and we both said, “*You* people?” And we rolled our eyes, and it was just! It was just a great bonding moment! And I don’t even know how to describe those, but I would definitely say in terms of LGBT culture, I love the fact that we can [snaps] pick up on shit like *that!* Like, you just have to lay it down once and everybody else picks it up. (Moana)

Small visible signs of identity, such as having a rainbow pin on my bag, um, referencing certain...certain cultural references. I reference those as a way of making space for myself as a queer person in, uh, otherwise heterodominant situations. (Jenny)

Sexual minorities also described the straight-forward, although not always easy or available, option of communicating to others about their sexual identity. Kendra shared, “you know, sometimes hinting isn’t enough and you kind of just have to be brave and take that and just self-disclose um, and hope that it’s going to be received positively.” Moana also shared her experience of disclosing her sexual identity by telling the person about her sexual identity, “I usually just tell people, ‘Yeah I... I like girls.’ Or I just tell them, ‘I’m really fucking gay.’” However, not all sexual minorities were as explicit in

their disclosure of sexual identity. Oscar described how he disclosed his sexual identity by referencing his partner or making comments on the attraction of other men.

prior to having my boyfriend, I would either... purposefully make a comment about another male, umm, in the sense that was either telling, like if I were... If I am out with friends, like new people that I'm like, "Oh... I feel comfortable with them. And I want them to know that I'm gay" sooo I will be like, "Oh my god that guy is really handsome, that guy is really attractive." (Oscar)

The process of disclosing sexual identity is a risky and, often times, difficult process. However, sexual minorities primarily made the decision to "come out" because they wished to be authentic and congruent about their sexual identity. Lexi expressed, "I'm just open about it 'cause it's just part of what I'm doing and who I am." Disclosing sexual identity has numerous benefits, such as higher social support (DiFulvio, 2011) and a stronger sense of identity and authenticity (Riggle & Rostosky, 2012; Riggle et al., 2008; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Identity development is a complex, multifaceted, and life-long task that is important for a coherent and affirming sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Specifically, forming and integrating sexual identity with their many intersecting identities proves to be a daunting task for many sexual minorities (Sarno et al., 2015). Researchers have continued to stress the importance of considering contextual factors that influence the identity development and psychological well-being of sexual minorities (Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Galliher et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2010). Sexual minorities undergo a process of developing their sexual identity within a heterosexual context while also attempting to make connections with the broader LGBTQ+ community and culture (Rust, 1993). With sexual minorities carefully navigating between these two cultures of sexuality, it is important to continue exploring the process of identity management within specific sociocultural contexts. The aim of the current study was to gain additional knowledge of sexual identity processes, conceptualizations of LGBTQ+ culture and the role that this plays for sexual minorities, as well as how sexual minorities manage and negotiate their identity while navigating within different contexts.

Three major themes emerged from the experiences of sexual minorities within this study: sexual identity processes and intersections, LGBTQ+ and heterosexual culture, and contextual navigation. Additionally, several subthemes emerged within these larger themes. Findings showed consistency with previous research on sexual identity

development, the importance of connecting with the LGBTQ+ community, and concealment and disclosure processes while also providing some novel contributions to the literature. Implications and future research are discussed below.

Implications and Future Research

LGBTQ+ Culture

LGBTQ+ culture has endured years of marginalization and oppression that sought to erase the very existence of an LGBTQ+ culture. Institutions that perpetuate discrimination, homophobia, and heterosexism perpetuate the lack of acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ culture, ultimately making the culture invisible. Sexual minorities are negatively affected when they feel invisible and unheard (Woodiel & Cowdery, 2013). Part of this may be due to the lack of research and ignoring LGBTQ+ as a cultural group. Despite political reform and an increase in acceptance of LGBTQ+ people over the past decade, much remains unknown about the health status of the LGBTQ+ community (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Promoting or perpetuating the invisibility of LGBTQ+ culture puts up a wall that makes it difficult and nearly impossible for sexual minorities to feel included, safe, and heard (Woodiel & Cowdery, 2013; Woodiel, Angermeier-Howard, & Hobson, 2003). The lack of acknowledgement of LGBTQ+ culture exacerbates systems of heterosexism, as well as the invisibility and isolation of sexual minorities as an “invisible” minority status (Dozier, 2015). Researchers, clinicians, and educators should promote the visibility and awareness of LGBTQ+ culture and its importance to sexual minorities.

There is still a gap in research and awareness of the unique stressors and processes sexual minorities experience in order to thrive despite systems of oppression within a heterodominant society. Connectedness to a community of shared qualities, experiences, and values is important in understanding identity and its association with psychological well-being (Meyer & Frost, 2012). Although the LGBTQ+ culture is highly diverse in terms of its members, findings demonstrate that LGBTQ+ culture consists of sexual minorities that have shared experiences, values, as well as a shared history. Findings from the present study suggest that LGBTQ+ culture appears to be important for sexual minorities and could have important links to resilience and mental health outcomes.

Researchers should also consider furthering measures of LGBTQ+ group identity (Sarno & Mohr, 2016) by providing culturally relevant items that may allow for an accurate measure of LGBTQ+ cultural identity. It is important to recognize and hear the voices of LGBTQ+ people of color and how they may identify with the culture. Enno (2011) sought to change this by adapting the MEIM to examine the multiple group identities of ethnic and sexual identity. In order to address the disparities of LGBTQ+ people of color, questions must be asked about the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.

A shocking amount of LGBTQ+ individuals report not receiving culturally competent care from medical or mental health providers (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), The National Institute of Mental Health (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), and the

Institute of Medicine (2011) report that health care research for sexual minorities is insufficient. Reports such as these are startling considering that sexual minorities seek mental health services more than heterosexual people (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003). Integration of contextual factors, intersectionality, and relevant information about sexual minority's connection with the LGBTQ+ culture may be helpful in providing culturally competent care. Curriculum, health care, and health services programs reflect systems that regulate what knowledge is categorized as "normal" and "valuable" and what knowledge is viewed as important (Apple, 2004). When perspectives and the voices of sexual minorities are excluded from curriculum within these programs, education suffers. Continued education and integrating material on sexual minorities and LGBTQ+ culture into the clinical training of psychology graduate programs is important in training practitioners to be more culturally competent (Pope, 1995).

The findings of the current study provide potential clinical implications, as clinicians can target and ask questions regarding cultural connectedness in therapy. Sexual minorities who feel detached from the LGBTQ+ culture may want to seek out more opportunities to connect with other sexual minorities. Implementing LGBTQ+ support groups at universities, schools, community health clinics, or even creating an online LGBTQ+ mentorship program may foster a better sense of community and connection to the LGBTQ+ culture, potentially leading to more positive mental health outcomes. This may also provide opportunities for reducing in-group discrimination at a micro-level, providing more cohesion and stronger connection within the culture.

It is important to note that the LGBT+ culture was described by many as a culture

of diversity. Clinicians and intervention and prevention researchers should make note of the diversity that is central to the LGBTQ+ culture and the many intersecting identities of its cultural members. While sexual minorities who identify with this culture all appear to have common goals that they see within the LGBTQ+ culture, not all of its members have a similar narrative. Clinicians should focus on the narrative of the client with whom they are working rather than making assumptions that all LGBTQ+ experiences are the same. Moreover, clinicians and intervention researchers need to pay close attention to the many intersecting identities and systems of oppression that impact sexual minorities. Approaching clinical work and intervention research through an intersectional lens will provide cultural and contextual competent care for this diverse community. Clinicians should know that not all sexual minorities identify or connect with the LGBTQ+ culture the same way. While some may be highly connected with the culture and engaging in social advocacy efforts, some sexual minorities may only participate in events such as Pride and not feel a sense of identity with the LGBTQ+ culture.

Contextual Navigation

Sexual minorities in the current study shared experiences of actively concealing their identity and the potential stressors and psychological consequences produced from this process. Previous research has found that there is a profound difference between *nondisclosure* and concealment, in that concealment is “not just the absence of disclosure, but a desire to prevent disclosure” (Schrimshaw, Siegel, Downing, & Parsons, 2013). Research has also found that the two separate constructs predict different outcomes. For example, Jackson and Mohr (2016) found that nondisclosure predicted

positive identity variables while concealment predicted positive *and* negative variables. Riggle et al (2017) found that concealment was associated with negative psychological well-being whereas nondisclosure was associated with fewer depressive symptoms.

Many measures of concealing sexual identity are focused around the behavior of communication and do not include other behaviors such as gender conformity, straight-passing, playing into heteronormative assumptions, or claiming status with a heterosexual relationship (i.e., bisexual and pansexual specifically). Jackson and Mohr (2016), however, have begun to expand the research and measurement of concealing sexual identity by including LGBTQ+ specific strategies and behaviors (i.e., avoiding LGBTQ+ stereotypic interests, avoiding contact with other sexual minorities). Further scale development is needed to better understand the behaviors interpersonal strategies sexual minorities utilize in order to conceal their sexual identity. Moreover, measurement of specific concealment strategies within a given social or cultural context is important in order to gain a holistic view of how this identity negotiation process affects the mental health of sexual minorities.

Pachankis (2007) created a model of concealing a stigmatized identity that demonstrates the situational information that then influences cognitive (i.e., preoccupation increased vigilance), affective (i.e., anxiety, depression, shame), behavioral (i.e., avoidance, isolation), and self-evaluation processes (i.e., negative view of self) of the sexual minority. However, this model does not include intersectional points of view that take into account the multiple intersecting identities within one's sense of self and how this influences this process. For example, a gay White man assessing the

context of his surroundings and deciding to conceal his sexual identity is much different from the experience of a Latinx gay man deciding to conceal or disclose his identity. Different intersecting identities may undergo a different process of identity saliency given a specific context. Additionally, the model assumes that sexual identity is concealable for all sexual minorities. Future models of concealment and disclosure should look into the processes undergone by those who “pass” and those who do not have “passing privilege.” Lastly, Pachankis’ (2007) model can also be expanded by adding the positive aspects of disclosing and concealing sexual identity given their specific context. Future models should explore the positive *and* negative effects of concealing or disclosing sexual identity and how this impacts mental health among sexual minorities.

The careful process of evaluating and deciding to disclose or conceal sexual identity within different contexts (i.e., contextual navigation) appears to be a unique stressor in the lives of sexual minorities. While the concept of contextual navigation can easily fall into the traditional mindset of researching the negative psychological outcomes of this process, focusing on resiliency is also equally, if not more, important. Contextual navigation could be a factor in positive identity development and mental health outcomes as well as a form of resiliency in coping with oppression, trauma and internalized stigma. Researching factors and mechanisms of resilience among sexual minorities can better inform in the development of effective interventions for the LGBTQ+ community (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Kwon, 2013). Savin-Williams (2008) critiqued the current body of literature concerning LGBTQ+ mental health, saying how there is “irresistible and overpowering attention to the problematic nature of same-sex oriented populations rather

than a focus on their capacities to adjust, thrive, and lead exceptionally ordinary lives” (p. 137). Focusing on the positive implications LGBTQ+ culture and contextual navigation has on the mental health and identity development of sexual minorities will promote a paradigm shift by focusing on how sexual minorities thrive despite adversity.

Limitations

Although the current study provided novel findings and consistency with previous research, it is important to note the limitations of the study to further future psychological research in this area. A critique familiar within the area of qualitative research, the small sample size combined with the qualitative methodology limits the generalizability of the study (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2006). Additionally, participants were mostly recruited from LGBTQ+ organizations, university diversity centers, and LGBTQ+ psychology listservs. By recruiting from these venues it may have biased the sample in that the majority of participants were “out” in most contexts of their lives and may have been highly involved in the LGBTQ+ community and culture. Participants recruited from psychology resources may have more familiarity with the language of identity development, of which may not be representative of the broader population. Future research should consider recruiting sexual minorities who are less involved in the LGBTQ+ community. Another limitation worth noting is whether the voices of transgender individuals were represented within this study. With only one participant identifying as transgender, it is not certain if enough information was obtained regarding the experiences of transgender individuals within the LGBTQ+ culture and how they

navigate within different sociocultural contexts.

Also worth noting are the power dynamics within the research team when collaborating and coding themes. While the data analysis in the present study was encouraged to be an equal and collaborative process, power dynamics may have played a role in making decisions on emerging themes within the study. For example, the primary researcher may have had more power in making decisions of themes than the undergraduate research assistant, and the primary researcher's faculty advisor could have had more power than the primary researcher. Future research should come up with ways that address and even these power dynamics when working with qualitative data.

Conclusion

The present study has offered sexual minorities' conceptualizations on the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ culture. The present study has also provided insight into the experiences of sexual minorities as they develop a sense of identity with the LGBTQ+ culture and how they manage their sexual identity while navigating different sociocultural contexts. Sexual minorities' experiences emphasize the importance of taking into account context when examining development and management (i.e., concealment, disclosure, salience) of sexual identity. Sexual minorities place a strong sense of identification and connection with the LGBTQ+ culture due to common values, beliefs, and shared experiences held across cultural members (i.e., acceptance, shared hardships, survival, inclusion). Sexual minorities also described the process of socially surveying their given context to determine if their sexual identity would be affirmed or if

they were at risk for being oppressed, which was often linked to affective and psychological outcomes (i.e., sadness, guilt, inauthenticity, anxiety).

When using qualitative methodology, the researcher is tasked with immersing themselves in the study in order to cultivate understanding about a given phenomenon while also being reflective of their biases, perspectives, and personal values and how they may influence the research. From conception of the project to the ending stages of writing the manuscript, I have been keenly aware of my experiences, intersecting identities, and the power and forces of privilege and oppression that have influenced my identity development and worldview. I was elated by stories of affirmation and advocacy, angered and saddened by the different institutions that oppressed sexual minorities' intersecting identities (of which I am privileged from, and will never be able to fully understand), and moved by the numerous accounts of resiliency in order to thrive in a heterodominant society. Overall, I felt a collective sense of pride in my LGBTQ+ "chosen family" and the obstacles they overcame in order to fight for the existence and visibility of LGBTQ+ culture. Their strength, openness, vulnerability, and resilience inspire me—and for that, I am eternally grateful.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Recruitment Text

Recruitment Text

We are recruiting individuals ages 18-25 who identify as LGBTQ+ to participate in a study regarding their experiences in the LGBTQ+ community. Study participation is confidential and includes one 60-90 minute online focus group interview, and an opportunity to review the summary of the group after it is transcribed.

Earn \$20 for participating in this research study!

Who are we? Joshua Parmenter (Joshua.Parmenter@aggiemail.usu.edu) and Dr. Renee Galliher (Renee.Galliher@usu.edu) from Utah State University's Psychology Department are the researchers for this study. We are actively involved in supporting the LGBTQ+ community and hope our research can be used to support LGBTQ+ individuals. This study has been reviewed and approved by the USU Institutional Review Board (Protocol #8509)

Click on the link below to learn more about the study and sign up for a focus group.

Appendix B

Demographics Survey and Measures

Demographic Information

1. What is your biological sex?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
2. What is your gender?
 - a. Man
 - b. Woman
 - c. Gender Fluid
 - d. Gender Queer
 - e. Gender Non-conforming
 - f. Other (*please specify*) _____
3. In what state do you presently reside? _____
4. What is your state of origin (or country if originally from outside of US)?
5. What is your age? _____
6. Which category best describes your racial/ethnic background? (check all that apply)
 - a. Latino/a/x
 - b. Black/ African American
 - c. White/ European American
 - d. Asian/ Pacific Islander
 - e. American Indian/ Alaska Native
 - f. Bi-racial/ Multi-racial
 - g. Other: (*please specify*) _____
9. How do you currently describe your sexual orientation:
 - a. Gay/Lesbian
 - b. Bisexual
 - c. Pansexual
 - d. Questioning
 - e. I prefer no label
 - f. Other: (*please specify*) _____
10. What is your current relationship status?
 - _____ single
 - _____ married heterosexual relationship
 - _____ married same-sex relationship
 - _____ unmarried, but committed to other-sex partner
 - _____ unmarried, but committed to same-sex partner
 - _____ divorced

_____widowed

11. Have you ever been married heterosexually? _____ Yes; _____ No. If Yes, what was the length in years of that marriage? _____
12. Are you a parent? _____ Yes; _____ No. If Yes, how many children?
 Biological? _____
 Adopted? _____
 Foster? _____
13. Please indicate your present level of yearly income.
 _____\$15,000 or less
 _____ \$15,000 - \$24,999
 _____ \$25,000 - \$34,999
 _____ \$35,000 - \$49,999
 _____ \$50,000 - \$74,999
 _____ \$75,000 - \$99,999
 _____ \$100,000 - \$149,999
 _____ \$150,000 - \$199,000
 _____ \$200,000 - \$299,000
 _____ \$300,000 - \$500,000
 _____ greater than \$500,000.
14. How would you describe the community you grew up in?
 a. Rural (*country*)
 b. Urban (*city*)
 c. Suburban (*subdivisions*)
15. What is your current religious affiliation, if any?
 a. LDS
 b. Episcopalian
 c. Lutheran
 d. Catholic
 e. Baptist
 f. Methodist
 g. Atheist
 h. Agnostic
 i. Hindu
 j. Buddhist
 k. Jewish
 l. Muslim
 m. None
 n. Other: (*please specify*) _____

16. What was your religious affiliation you were raised in, if any?

- a. LDS
- b. Episcopalian
- c. Lutheran
- d. Catholic
- e. Baptist
- f. Methodist
- g. Atheist
- h. Agnostic
- i. Hindu
- j. Buddhist
- k. Jewish
- l. Muslim
- m. None
- n. Other: (*please specify*) _____

17. Highest level of education completed:

- a. Elementary school
- b. High school degree
- c. Some college
- d. College graduate
- e. Technical or trade school graduate
- f. Professional or graduate degree
- g. Other: (*please specify*) _____

18. What identity is most important/central when explaining who you are?

Sexual Orientation History

“GLBTQ” is a term used to describe those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning. For the purposes of this survey, it includes those who report some level of same-sex attractions or engage in same-sex sexual behavior.

1. _____ If applicable, what was the earliest age in years that you began to sense a difference (feeling, attitudes, behavior) between yourself and others of your same age and biological sex that you now recognize or attribute to your same-sex sexual orientation?
2. _____ At what age in years did you first realize you were attracted romantically or sexually to persons of the same sex?
3. With reference to you first experience of same-sex attraction (item 2 above) what event, relationship, or interaction led you to consider this?
4. How old were you when you experienced your first same-sex romantic or sexual experience?
 _____ Age
 _____ Have never done this
5. How old were you when you first labeled yourself GLBTQ (or another personal label you have chosen for yourself)?
 _____ Age
 _____ I have never labeled myself GLBTQ
6. How old were you when you first told someone of your same-sex attraction?
 _____ Age
 _____ Have not told anyone
7. Are you: _____ sexually active; _____ celibate by choice; _____ celibate due to lack of partner

For the following 4 questions, please select a number on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 means closed or non-supportive, and 5 means very open or supportive.

8. _____ How open/supportive are your parents and family, toward sexual and gender diversity in general?
9. _____ How open/supportive is your school/work environment toward diversity, especially sexual and gender diversity?

10. _____ How open is your neighborhood/community toward diversity, especially sexual and gender diversity?
11. _____ How supportive is (or was it growing up) it to be a sexual minority in your family?
12. _____ How supportive is (or was it growing up) it to be a sexual minority in your community?

13. To what degree have you disclosed your sexual orientation (*told others you were gay/lesbian/bisexual/questioning/etc.*):

	<i>None A Few Some A lot Everyone</i>				
Immediate Family	1	2	3	4	5
Friends	1	2	3	4	5
Classmates/Coworkers	1	2	3	4	5
People with whom you are religiously affiliated	1	2	3	4	5

14. Overall, what degree are you “open” regarding your sexual orientation:
- a. I have not told anyone about my sexual orientation
 - b. I have told less than half of the people about my sexual orientation
 - c. I have told more than half of the people about my sexual orientation
 - d. I am totally open about my sexual orientation

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale

For each of the following statements, mark the response that best indicates your experience as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) person. Please be as honest as possible in your responses.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7
Disagree **Agree**
Strongly **Strongly**

1. ☐ I prefer to keep my same-sex romantic relationships rather private.
2. ☐ I will never be able to accept my sexual orientation until all of the people in my life have accepted me.
3. ☐ I would rather be straight if I could.
4. ☐ Coming out to my friends and family has been a very lengthy process.
5. ☐ I'm not totally sure what my sexual orientation is.
6. ☐ I keep careful control over who knows about my same-sex romantic relationships.
7. ☐ I often wonder whether others judge me for my sexual orientation.
8. ☐ I am glad to be an LGB person.
9. ☐ I look down on heterosexuals.
10. ☐ I keep changing my mind about my sexual orientation.
11. ☐ My private sexual behavior is nobody's business.
12. ☐ I can't feel comfortable knowing that others judge me negatively for my sexual orientation.
13. ☐ Homosexual lifestyles are not as fulfilling as heterosexual lifestyles.
14. ☐ Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very painful process.
15. ☐ If you are not careful about whom you come out to, you can get very hurt.
16. ☐ Being an LGB person makes me feel insecure around straight people.
17. ☐ I'm proud to be part of the LGB community.
18. ☐ Developing as an LGB person has been a fairly natural process for me.
19. ☐ I can't decide whether I am bisexual or homosexual.
20. ☐ I think very carefully before coming out to someone.
21. ☐ I think a lot about how my sexual orientation affects the way people see me.
22. ☐ Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very slow process.
23. ☐ Straight people have boring lives compared with LGB people.
24. ☐ My sexual orientation is a very personal and private matter.
25. ☐ I wish I were heterosexual.
26. ☐ I get very confused when I try to figure out my sexual orientation.
27. ☐ I have felt comfortable with my sexual identity just about from the start.

Note: *Subscale scores are computed by reverse-scoring items as needed and averaging subscale item ratings. Subscale composition is as follows (underlined items should be reverse-scored): Need for Privacy (1, 6, 11, 15, 20, 24), Need for Acceptance (2, 7, 12, 16, 21), Internalized Homonegativity (3, 8 13, 17, 25), Difficult Process (4, 14, 18, 22, 27), Identity Confusion (5, 10, 19, 26), Identity Superiority (9, 23).*

Appendix C
Letter of Intent



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 Protocol #8509
 IRB Approval Date: June 19, 2017
 Consent Document Expires: June 18, 2018
 Amendment #1 Approved: July 4, 2017
 Amendment #3 Approved: August 29, 2017
 IRB Password Protected per IRB Director

v.10 9.1.2016

Letter of Information

The Culture of Sexuality: Identification, Conceptualization, and Acculturation Processes within Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Culture

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Renee Galliher, professor, and Joshua Parmenter, a graduate student in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University. The purpose of this research is to understand sexual minority individuals' conceptualization and identification with the LGBTQ culture and how they negotiate their identity in different cultural contexts. This form includes detailed information on the research to help you decide whether to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

Procedures

Your participation will involve completing a 10-minute online survey designed to gather information about your history with regard to your sexual orientation and other aspects of your identity. Subsequently, you will participate in an online individual interview assessing your experiences in LGBTQ culture, your identification with the LGBTQ culture, and how you negotiate your sexual identity in different cultural contexts. Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. You may decline to respond to any questions you would prefer not to answer. Interviews are expected to last one hour. Finally, you will be invited to participate in an online focus group with approximately five other participants, aimed at consolidating the findings from the individual interviews and generating a broader group discussion of LGBTQ culture. Focus groups are expected to last 1 to 1.5 hours, and will also be digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. We anticipate that 15 people will participate in this research study across 3 to 4 different focus groups. We will send you a copy of the transcription of your focus group by email and ask you to review it for accuracy or any additional comments you would like to add.

Risks

This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. Loss of privacy and confidentiality are possible risks, due to the use of videoconferencing for the focus groups and online participation in general. However, you will provide and use a pseudonym to keep your identity confidential and people within the focus group will be instructed to not disclose anyone's participation in the study if you are recognized. You also have the option of turning off the video during the focus group, and participating through audio only. No identifying information will be collected in the survey except an email address. There is also the possibility that you may experience some discomfort answering questions about your sexual identity. You may refuse to answer questions or discontinue the participation at any time. If you have a negative research-related experience, please contact the principal investigator of this study right away at (435) 797-3391 or Renee.Galliher@usu.edu.

Benefits

There may be no direct benefit to you for participating in this research study. However, we anticipate that some participants will benefit from the opportunity for candid discussion about their identity development and their participation in LGBTQ+ culture. More broadly, this study will help the researchers learn more about sexual identity development and may help health care providers and educators provide better interventions and more knowledge about the LGBTQ culture.

Confidentiality

The researchers will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide as part of this study remains confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this



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research study. However, it may be possible for someone to recognize your particular response. While we will ask all group members to keep the information they hear in this group confidential, we cannot guarantee that everyone will do so. To help us maintain confidentiality, please do not use your real name in the focus group setting. If you have an email address that does not include your name, we would prefer that you use that email address with us for communication and transcription purposes.

We will collect your information through video recordings and Qualtrics. Data will be securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, which is an encrypted, cloud-based storage platform. Your name and email will not be connected to any video or survey response. You will be asked to use your pseudonym for all data collection. The research team works to ensure confidentiality to the degree permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. However, your participation in this online study involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the internet. Because the interviews and focus groups are conducted via videoconferencing, your visual identity may be known to other focus group participants and the researchers conducting the focus group, unless you choose not to use video. We anticipate that approximately five other participants will be in your focus group, and all participants will be asked to respect the confidentiality of focus group members. Videos will be destroyed upon completion of data collection and transcription. Your name and email address will be destroyed after the focus groups are transcribed and you have an opportunity to review the transcripts. We anticipate that all transcription and review of transcripts will be completed by September 2018. De-identified transcripts and survey responses will be kept indefinitely.

It is unlikely, but possible, that others (Utah State University or state or federal officials) may require us to share the information you give us from the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so. The researchers are required to report any suspected child abuse or intention you have to hurt yourself or others. If required by a court of law, they may also be required to disclose the information you have provided.

Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by simply exiting the survey or leaving the focus group.

Compensation

Upon completion of the online survey and individual interview, you will receive a \$20 Amazon.com giftcard delivered by email. If you choose to participate in the online focus group, you will receive a second \$20 Amazon gift card delivered by email.

IRB Review

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at (435) 797-3391 or Renee.Galliher@usu.edu or the student investigator at Joshua.parmenter@aggiemail.usu.edu. If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or irb@usu.edu.

Renee V. Galliher, PhD
 Principal Investigator
 (435) 797-3391; Renee.Galliher@usu.edu

Joshua G. Parmenter
 Student Investigator
joshua.parmenter@aggiemail.usu.edu

Appendix D
Individual Interview Script

Interview Script

For today's discussion, I would like to better understand experiences related to your sexual identity, your views on the LGBTQ+ community, how you may define or describe the LGBTQ+ culture and heterodominant culture, as well as your sense of belonging with a particular culture. Also, this is a very complex topic talking about identity as there are many different aspects that create our overall sense of self.

Throughout this process, please consider and feel free to include how your gender, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities may have influenced your LGBTQ+ identity. I encourage us to dive into these complexities as much as we can. To begin, we will introduce ourselves (using your pseudonym) and provide your sexual identity and gender identity (gender pronouns).

- 1) Can you tell me a little more about your sexual identity?
- 2) Would you consider your sexual identity central to who you are? Why or why not?
- 3) What is LGBTQ+ culture?
- 4) How is this Culture important to you?
- 5) Can you explain the normative behaviors and beliefs within LGBTQ+ culture?
- 6) Can you explain the ideals within LGBTQ+ culture?
- 7) How were your ideas about LGBTQ+ culture influenced by where you were from/raised? How has this evolved overtime?
 - a) Prompt participants to specifically think about rural vs urban, religious contexts, family beliefs, etc.

- 8) What is the heterosexual culture?
- 9) Can you explain the normative behaviors and beliefs within the heterodominant culture?
- 10) What is it like to experience norms and beliefs that are not aligned with your identity or perspective?
- 11) Could you explain how you identify with one or both of these cultures?
- 12) How do you navigate between the LGBTQ+ culture and the heterodominant culture?
- 13) What strategies do you use to conceal or reveal your identity when in the heterodominant culture?
 - a) How do you feel your other identities fit or don't fit with the LGBTQ+ culture (i.e., gender, ethnic, cultural, religious, etc.)?
 - b) How do you experience yourself culturally in the community?
- 14) How do you express or experience your other identities (gender, ethnicity, etc.) within the LGBT culture and within heterodominant culture?
- 15) Is there anything else that would be helpful for me to know as we discuss the LGBTQ+ culture?
- 16) Is there anything else that would be useful to add for future interviews or focus groups?

Thank you for participating in our study! We will be sending you information on the next steps of the study (attending a follow-up focus group and reviewing your interview transcripts). We also will be emailing you a \$20 Amazon gift card within the next week

or two for participating in the first phase of the project. Once again, thank you for participating and I will be in contact with you about the next steps. Feel free to email me with any questions.

Appendix E

Focus Group Interview Script

Parmenter Thesis Focus Group Script

For today's discussion, I would like to follow up on some of the themes that have come up from the individual interviews. I would like to understand more about your sexual identity, how you manage your sexual identity, and your relationship with the LGBTQ+ culture. As identity is a very complex topic, as there are many different aspects that create our overall sense of self. Throughout this process, please consider and include how your gender, ethnic, religious, political, and cultural identities may have influenced your sexual identity. I encourage that we dive into these complexities as much as we can. To begin, we will introduce ourselves (using your pseudonym) and provide your sexual identity and gender identity (gender pronouns).

(Introductions)

1. Talk about how social context influences your sexual identity and how central it is to you?
 1. "Social surveillance"
2. Explain how your sexual identity might become more or less central when challenged or threatened?
3. How does your sexual identity fit or not fit with other aspects of your identity (i.e., ethnic, religious, gender)?
4. What are the values of the LGBTQ+ culture?
5. What were the resources you used to explore your sexual identity development?
 1. Prompt for:
 1. LGBTQ+ culture
 2. Media or the internet
 3. Peers

4. Mentors

6. How in-tune is our generation about LGBTQ+ history?
7. Describe the process of concealing and disclosing your sexual identity?
 1. How do you feel when you conceal or reveal your identity?
 2. What are the reasons behind concealing or revealing your identity?
8. How do sexual minorities “have a foot in both” the heterodominant and LGBTQ+ cultures?
9. How do you adapt or assimilate to the heterodominant culture?
10. Explain what “passing privilege” or “straight passing” is. What does this entail or look like?
11. Where would you like to see the culture go in the future? How should the culture progress forward?